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The Relationship between Transitional Kindergarten Teachers' Beliefs about their Practices to School Readiness and Developmentally Appropriate Practices

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**Publication Date**

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

The Relationship between Transitional Kindergarten Teachers' Beliefs about their Practices to  
School Readiness and Developmentally Appropriate Practices

By

JUNE REGIS  
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2022

## Abstract

According to Ramey and Ramey (2004),

*School readiness and school achievement are at the forefront of our country's domestic social policy concerns. And the need to help America's children truly succeed in school and life as a well-educated citizenry is vital to keep our nation economically strong and productive democracy. (p. 472)*

Campbell et al. (2014) stated, "High-quality early childhood programs have been shown to have substantial benefits in reducing crime, raising earnings, and promoting education."

The State of California established the California Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010 (SB1381) and the genesis of Transitional Kindergarten (TK). The Act intended for TK to provide an additional year of early education with the goal of promoting school readiness through Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) (AIR, 2015). DAP promotes physical, social emotional, cognitive, and cultural competencies for the students.

My study examined the TK teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices in relation to school readiness and DAP. This qualitative study, therefore, interviewed and observed TK teachers' interpretations (i.e., beliefs and practices) of a developmentally appropriate curriculum in its TK classes. These six TK teachers were from two school districts in Northern California. There is potential for improved teaching when teachers are able to reflect on how their beliefs align with their practices.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate my dissertation journey:

Firstly, to my ABBA, my Most HOLY GOD, my JEHOVAH JIREH. HIS Son and my Savior JESUS CHRIST and to the Blessed HOLY SPIRIT, my paraclete and guide for granting me the fortitude, wisdom and understanding to actually complete this long marathon of a journey.

My family:

To Albert, my husband, friend, love and life partner for his steadfast unconditional love, support and understanding throughout this long process.

To Ayana, my daughter who is equal to ten sons, always pushing me to move forward and encouraging me through this journey.

To Michael, my son-in-love for always having a good word and a positive outlook on any circumstance.

To my extremely terrific and inspirational grand babies, Mikayla, Anaya and Michael, my boy love. Grandma persevered and did this to show that you can do anything too and never give up on your dreams.

To all my extended family, friends and colleagues, thank you for your prayers, positive words and pushing me forward.

To my original dissertation committee, my chair Dr. Paul Heckman whom I promised that I would complete the dissertation. Rest in Peace and Thank you Sir! Dr. Viki Montera and Dr. Karen Grady thank you for all your support on my doctoral journey.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am exceedingly humbled and thankful for all the support I received during my long doctoral journey.

Thanks to my extraordinary chair, Dr. Paul Porter who came to my rescue when I needed to reconstitute my committee. Your support, time, kindness and patience throughout my journey of many edits and my long pauses pushed me over the finish line and I am forever grateful.

To my dissertation committee members Dr. Gloria M. Rodriguez and Dr. Charles F Young. I thank you for your kindness and helping me to finish with your support and feedback. Your positive outlook and nudges were a bright light to guide my path to the end of the tunnel.

Thanks to Dr. Rosa and the CANDEL staff for your continued support on my journey to completion.

Thanks to Dr. Maggie and the rest of my Cohort 4 Educational leader peers for encouraging me to finish the dissertation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

For a number of years, school readiness and the benefits of preparing young children, specifically those of low socioeconomic status and English language learners, for transition to and entry and success in kindergarten have been popular topics in the field of education.

According to Ramey and Ramey (2004),

*School readiness and school achievement are at the forefront of our country's domestic social policy concerns. And the need to help America's children truly succeed in school and life as a well-educated citizenry is vital to keep our nation economically strong and productive democracy. (p. 472)*

Campbell et al. (2014) stated, "High-quality early childhood programs have been shown to have substantial benefits in reducing crime, raising earnings, and promoting education." According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), in 2005, only 43% of 3-year-olds and 69% of 4-year-olds attended an early education preschool and a decrease in 2018 of 68 % of 4-year-olds and 40% of 3-year-olds attended an early education program as a result of less available early education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Therefore, some young children often spend at least two years in an early education setting before entering kindergarten. Educators have disputed the most beneficial features of educational settings to prepare young children for kindergarten. One such debate has been the appropriateness of teacher directed approaches versus more developmentally appropriate approaches.

For example, in a study of 34 teachers regarding their beliefs about instructional practices, Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) argued that a teacher directed setting is best for immature, high ability, and special needs students. Others, like, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), have urged classrooms for young children to reflect Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) as the preferred and the most beneficial features of classroom for preparing young children for kindergarten (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp &

Copple, 1997; International Reading Association, 1986; National Association of Early Childhood Specialist in State Department of Education, 1987; National Association of Elementary Principals, 1990; Schultz & Lombardi, 1989).

Senate Bill 1381, authored by Joseph Smithian, mandated new classes in California called Transitional Kindergarten (TK) for all school districts. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act into law in September 2010. The Act required the establishment of TK classes, that would comprise the first year of a two-year kindergarten phase. The classes would be funded through Average Daily Attendance (ADA), becoming part of the foundation funding for the entire K-12 system. Each teacher of a TK class was required to be a credentialed elementary teacher. The classroom practices in those classes were also required to reflect developmentally appropriate curriculum and classroom practices that align with the features that the NAEYC spelled out in its publication about DAP.

DAP promote physical, social emotional, cognitive, and cultural competencies for the students. The classrooms were also to reflect three core dimensions: (a) provisions for social and cultural contexts for the child, (b) children's development and learning that reflected their individual home experiences, and (c) teachers' planning processes for the curriculum that focus on the students (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). DAP, as used in this study, refer to practices for teaching young children that are grounded in research reflecting how children learn as well as the research in effective early education and promotion of optimal learning and childhood development in social/emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

The term DAP was first coined and developed by the NAEYC in 1987. This term is not normally used in the K-12 education system but is extremely important in the education of young students in the beginning grades of schooling. The term may also appear to be in opposition to

common practices in K-12, contrasting with high stakes testing, and “teaching to the test” (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In stark contrast, traditional kindergartens do not use curricula that have DAP as a focus. Instead, kindergarten classrooms appear to focus on academics with a narrow skill definition and stress mastery of given content and facts.

According to Hegde et al. (2014), teachers’ beliefs of developmentally appropriate practices, such as social-emotional learning and play in kindergarten, aligned closely with a play-based curriculum; however, most current kindergarten programs are eliminating play and replacing it with academic work that stresses a narrow skill orientation and encourages students to master content standards without regard for the students’ social emotion development. Instead, in these TK DAP concepts encourage settings a paradigm shift from routine school classrooms, in which normal use of traditional methods such as rigid, teacher directed standard-based pacing guidelines with testing that comprise the focal point for measuring student accomplishments and progress (Elicker & Mathur, 1997).

### **The Nature of DAP**

The State of California established the California Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010 (SB1381) and the genesis of TK. The Act intended for TK to provide an additional year of early education with the goal of promoting school readiness through DAP (AIR, 2015). My study examined the TK teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices in relation to school readiness and DAP.

The DAP focus then turns to the whole child instead of the teacher-directed approach for teachers (O’Brien, 2006). The DAP approach bids teachers to consider the question: For what purpose do we educate? Although that question cannot be definitively answered, one possible answer is that classrooms and teachers educate students to understand the world in which they

live, and teachers must be willing and able to act to make changes when necessary in their classroom settings (Bullough, 2011; Watkins and Mortimore, 1999). This is the essence of democratic life that make learners and teachers unique (Sloan, 2012). Achieving purpose calls for engaged pedagogies that include teachers as reflective practitioners, as transformative intellectuals, and as whole, passionate, caring people. The knowledge and understanding of teaching is a unique potpourri of the teachers' own cultural, religious, ethical, and personal values (Bergeron & Dean, 2013).

Teachers also contribute to forging responsive and nurturing relationships with each of their students and, in turn, encourage students' emotional and social competences, building a positive base for a caring community of learners with emotional understanding and supporting self-regulated emotions (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009). Thompson and Happold (2002) noted the importance of three qualities for what they call school readiness, which involve (a) social emotional, (b) motivational, and (c) intellectual aspects. Young children who have mastered these qualities can work alongside their peers, are aware of their peers' feelings, and follow teachers' directions. Students who arrive in kindergarten with these qualities appear to do well and, if these qualities are absent, do not succeed in school (Thompson & Happold, 2002).

School readiness preparation also includes self-regulatory skills, which are also essential for future achievement. Self-regulation is a broad, multidimensional construct consisting of both behavioral and cognitive processes (Liew, 2011). The skills of self-regulation and executive function are mental processes that are learned. These skills have lifelong benefits like planning and juggling tasks, memorizing rules and instructions, paying attention or focusing, and controlling impulses. Students are not born with these skills as they are learned in early education programs from teachers through school readiness activities. When students do not

receive or have access to teachers and environments that facilitate the development of children's executive functions, these children can experience delays or impairment (Executive Function & Self-Regulation, 2016).

Early education teachers who practice DAP utilize a number of strategies from establishing routines, scaffolding, and giving their students opportunities to direct themselves with decreasing adult guidance. Early education teachers must create positive environments, model social behavior, and facilitate conflict resolution, which foster social connections and creative play (Executive Function & Self-Regulation, 2016). In addition, Han (2010) stated that,

The importance of children's social competence as a developmental foundation in early childhood has been well supported. The ability to interact effectively and maintain positive relationships with others has been documented to be a strong predictor for children's school readiness and positive school adjustment, as well as for success on standardized achievement tests. (p. 81)

DAP are largely congruent with constructivist ideas regarding children's learning, as young children actively engage in making their own understanding from their daily experiences. Children also actively construct knowledge or understand concepts through their own activities by acting as doers and thinkers instead of receiving the answers from their teachers. Young children are encouraged to solve problems, observe and predict results, listen to and use language, manipulate objects, and collaborate with their peers; thus, their own concerns and motivations are important in forming their learning. Young children practice activities that are meaningful to them and learn in concrete, relational, informal, exploration, and make-believe play (Bowman, 1998).

In addition, Mortimore (1999) declared, "Virtually every form of early childhood pedagogy is based on play and play is called children's 'work' and is effective in motivating children and enhancing learning, providing a context for experimentation and exploration and is

developmentally appropriate.” Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) stated that the first German kindergarten established by Froebel separated play and work in which the students were supervised in the garden and kitchen but were left on their own when playing. Froebel et al. agreed that children learn by being active, and play provides them the opportunity to be in control of what's happening and what they know. Children communicate and interpret through play continuously through negotiations with their peers and role play (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

Vygotsky (1978) believed that play offers a context for young children to acquire skills and schema and to practice social roles. Play also encourages the expression of children's ideas and thoughts and allows children to actively express their emotions, resolve conflicts, gain confidence, and interact with each other. Play also helps students reach their full potential through activities and an environment that is challenging but not frustrating (Wood et al., 1976). Vygotsky called this the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the “distance between the actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

### **The Importance of Teachers' Beliefs in Encouraging DAP**

The significance of teachers understanding their own thinking and decision making regarding DAP leads to a shift that turns attention to DAP ideas (Munby, 1982). Researchers have suggested that beliefs and dispositions have profound effects on teacher decisions and classroom practice (Parajes, 1992; Raymond, 1993; Renzagalia et al., 1997; Richardson, 1996; Thompson, 1992). In addition, research has shown that prospective teacher perspectives and

beliefs, attitudes, mindset, and thinking tend to mediate the process of learning to teach (Goodman & Adler, 1985; Hollingsworth, 1989; Parajes, 1992). Zheng (2009) stated teachers' beliefs are important in understanding their thought processes, instructional practices, and the process of teachers' change and learning to teach.

For example, there are many teachers in early childhood classrooms who may believe in misconceptions regarding the usefulness of DAP and of the didactic practices they enact in their classrooms (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). These teachers may not fully comprehend the meanings and actions necessary for them to involve the physical, social emotional, cognitive, and cultural competencies called for by the NAYEC for these transitional settings. Therefore, teachers' beliefs are important in interpreting their practices in this new class arrangement called TK.

Individuals use their belief systems to navigate and understand their worlds (Pajares, 1992). With these systems, teachers sift, interpret, and adapt their classroom practices to the realities that arise in these settings (Clark & Peterson, 1986). These beliefs can also influence the achievement of their students (Davis, & Pape, 2006; Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2014; Woolfolk Hoy & Zheng, 2009).

Collective teacher efficacy delivers a triple threat as it influences student achievement indirectly through productive patterns of teaching behavior. Such behaviors include implementing high-yield strategies (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018).

Kurz and Knight (2004) conducted a study of 113 high school teachers in the southwestern United States during a teacher in service meeting. The teachers completed three surveys that measured the variables of teacher efficacy and goal consensus/vision. Correlational and regression analyses were performed to examine the relationships among individual teacher



efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, and goal consensus/vision. Collective teacher efficacy was found to be correlated with all of the other variables examined, but was most highly correlated with goal consensus and vision. Individual teacher efficacy, while related to collective teacher efficacy, was not found to be related to goal consensus and vision. The study findings suggest that individual teacher efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, and goal consensus and vision are related, changing one could impact the others. Collectively and individually, teachers' beliefs act as a subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure of mental states that are thought to drive a person's actions.

Teachers' beliefs shape their explanations of their classroom actions and the degree to which these actions correspond with research on DAP. Charlesworth et al. (1993) quoted Isenberg (1990), who stated, "Conventional research on teaching has focused on practice, ignoring the thought processes of teachers" (p. 257). Yero (2002) agreed, stating that "because teachers' thought processes occur inside their heads, they can't be measured, quantified, or standardized." In essence, teachers' thought processes do not yield the data with which traditional researchers are accustomed to working. Nevertheless, as Albert Einstein reminds us, "Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted." Failure to explore the influence of teacher thinking may, in fact, be one of the most important variables in the educational equation on the educational process and therefore cannot be excused because of its difficulty in measuring.

An important task for researchers is to identify teachers' beliefs in relationship to their actions, as they relate to embracing standards of practice for DAP. When there are inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs and their practices, teachers can be supported and encouraged in reflecting upon and analyzing their old and new beliefs and their actions about DAP and how students learn

(Isenberg, 1990). Isenberg (1990) concluded that it is important to focus more research on teachers' beliefs to understand better teachers' thinking behind their practices. Therefore, the study of teacher beliefs and how these beliefs impact their practice as well as what strategies can help to reshape these beliefs was the core of the current study.

### **This Study**

The current study focused on the elements involved in a developmentally appropriate program. This case study examined the teacher-child classroom interactions in TK classrooms in two school districts in Northern California. The study focused on TK teachers in the district in their classroom settings, and the researcher undertook classroom observations and teacher interviews to explore the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children?

**RQ2:** What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations, and practices are congruent with DAP?

**RQ3:** To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond/compare with the teachers' observed practices?

### **The Significance of the Study**

This study examined the classroom practices and the beliefs of teachers in newly developed transitional kindergartens. The researcher sought both commonalities and differences across manifestations found in these classroom settings. Each of these TK teachers was considered a case study that was unique to gain an understanding of their practices and explanations in their classrooms. The researcher assumed that the complex meanings of TK are understood differently due to the particular practices and contexts of each case. Although the

cases may be similar in many areas and respects, there were differences regarding how uniformity or disparity characterizes TK (Stake, 2006).

Early Education opportunities have been the center of many conversations and speeches including the President Obama's remarks that "Early Education is one of the best investments we can make not just in a child's future, but in our country. It's one of the best investments we can make" at the 2014 Early Education Summit State (White House, 2014). This is the golden ticket to broaden the early education opportunities for young children. TK is an important topic that has only being established in California over the past few years as an early learning opportunity. Many studies on teacher beliefs and practices have focused on K-12 school teachers rather than teachers in early education (Wen et al., 2011) As a result, few studies have been conducted on TK and its current teachers. Therefore, the current study chartered new ground and added to a new base of research data being built and compiled on teaching in TK.

TK is a mandatory program for all California's school districts that offer kindergarten programs. The law (SB 1381) states the program should use a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate. This vague instruction has led school districts to interpret the law differently, and teachers are responsible for selecting and using various types of curricula. Kagan (1992) agreed that "In a landscape without bearings, teachers create and internalize their own maps." TK was also birthed in a season of massive teacher layoffs and, as a result, many unprepared teachers were sent to TK classrooms (Taylor, 2012). Wen et al. (2011) also pointed out that teachers certified in early childhood education were more likely to report the use of developmentally appropriate activities than other teachers. It is interesting and important to note that the law mandated the use of K-12 certified teachers for TK classrooms.

In the 2022-23 school year, AB 22 will extend universal access to TK programs to all 4-year-olds statewide at no cost to families, while also implementing TK quality improvements to address the social-emotional and early academic development of California's youngest learners. Universal TK is a crucial piece of a larger package of 2021 Early Childhood Education (ECE) legislation that will strengthen California's ECE system to better meet the needs of working families, support childcare providers, and most importantly ensure that every child in California is given a strong start to a successful future.

This study, therefore, observed TK teachers' interpretations (i.e., beliefs and practices) of a developmentally appropriate curriculum in its TK classes. These TK teachers were from two school districts in Northern California. There is potential for improved teaching when teachers are able to reflect on how their beliefs align with their practices.

## **Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature**

The literature review for this study includes an examination of the areas relevant to the relationship between TK teachers' beliefs about their practices to school readiness and DAP. The review focuses on the purpose and history of TK and preschool, the elements or tenets of a developmentally appropriate transitional kindergarten, teachers of TK classrooms, the DAP theoretical background, DAP assessments, early education DAP research, and teacher perceptions.

### **The History of Transition Kindergartens in California: Original Purpose and History A Look at a Kindergarten Past and Present**

In America, many states introduced kindergarten in the 1960s and 1970s with the purpose of easing the home-to-school transition by emphasizing socialization and play-based curriculums. Thirty years later, in the 1990s, kindergarten was transformed into a skills-oriented academic environment with rigorous reading, math, writing activities. The rigorous preparation has replaced the play and socialization education (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). With the California Common Core standards adoption in 2010 and required implementation in 2014, kindergartens were expected to have added standards, creating even more rigor to their school day, thus making school readiness even more crucial (CDE, 2010). As a result, a child with no prior early schooling can be ill-prepared for traditional kindergarten rigor.

Graue (1993), raised the question, "is readiness an identifiable characteristic, and is it the same in all children, classrooms, and school?" According to Van Horn et al. (2005), the pressure of the public perception in the 1970s and 1980s that American children were behind the rest of the world academically led to the extension of didactic teaching, traditional academic-focused curriculum, and academically directed classrooms (i.e., DAP) to kindergarten and early

education. This was never the intention or vision of Fredrick Froebel, popularly known as the Father of Kindergarten.

In the 1800s, under the tutor ledge and influence of Pestalozzi, Froebel birthed the German kindergarten. In this kindergarten, or “gardens for children,” he could articulate the ideal education through his Harmonious Development of Heart, Mind and Body (Braun & Edwards, 1972). Froebel was very idealistic in his approach to education, for he viewed Kindergarten as a vital rung on a person’s learning experience ladder to reshape mankind’s image to that of God. He believed humanity would understand themselves through education and be at peace, unity, and oneness with nature and God. This unification belief led to a new concept for young children’s education (Braun & Edwards, 1972).

In these gardens for children, children were given the same rights and respect as adults by educators and were allowed to experience their own personal unity and unity in others. Froebel’s curriculum focused on the children’s individual progress and promoted a balance of teaching what was needed to be successful in society while also allowing children the freedom and confidence to grow as individuals. Children spent some part of their day satisfying these two areas and were allowed to use play as the vehicle to navigate the balance (Braun & Edwards, 1972). Froebel described play in his book *The Education of Man*:

Play is the highest phase of child development – of human development at this period; for it is self-active representation of the inner-representation of the inner from inner necessity and impulse. Play is the purest most spritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole- of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good. A child that plays thoroughly, with self active determination, perseveringly until physical fatigue forbids, will surely be a thorough, determined man, capable of self sacrifice for the promotion of the welfare of himself and others. Is not the most beautiful expression of child-life at this time a playing child?-a child wholly absorbed in his play?- a child that has fallen asleep while so absorbed? The plays of childhood are the geminal leaves of all later life; for the whole

man is developed and shown in these, in his tenderest, dispositions, in his innermost tendencies. The whole later life of man even to the moment he leaves I, has its source in the period of childhood- be this later life pure or impure, gentle or violent, quiet or impulsive, industrious or indolent, rich or poor in deeds, passed in dull stupor or in keen creativeness, in stupid wonder or intelligent insight, producing or destroying, the bringer of harmony or discord, or war or peace. (Braun & Edwards, 1972)

With play as the vehicle for learning, Froebel developed a curriculum using “gifts” (Table 1) which he designed for use with his kindergarten students. These gifts were tangible objects designed to serve as an alphabet of form with which the children could learn to read by forming an organically, connected sequence, moving in logical order from an object that contains all qualities with no direct focus, to objects more specialized in nature and more suggestive to use placing each gift on demand by its predecessor (Wiggins & Smith, 2010).

These gifts would lead his students through the planned occupations, or activities similar to the modern-day arts and crafts and games. He also developed a training institute for new teachers and promoted the observation of students to develop a curriculum that met their individual needs (Braun & Edwards, 1972). These activities led to the development of children’s mind, spirit, and body through experiences that included music and movement, nature, independence, and creativity (Bryant & Clifford, 1992).

**Table 1***Table of Froebel's Gifts*

Gift	Description	Purpose	Appropriate Use	Contemporary Issues
First	Six soft different solid colored balls (red, blue, orange, yellow, green, purple)	Represents a circle, the simplest shape in nature; shows oneness with nature.	Easily manipulated.  Use to teach mobility.	Represents unity. Develops hand strength.  Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, and eye-hand coordination.
Second	Solid wooden sphere, cube and cylinder each 2 inches in diameter	Helps children understand idea of "forms."	Use to move child to observe different shapes.	Teaches how to compare/contrast.  Introduces three everyday shapes.  Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination.
Third	One wooden cube formed by eight smaller cubes	Promotes "building" skills; introduces "universal house" concept.	Use to teach how to create something from similar smaller parts.	Formation of whole from distinct smaller units.  Issue of diverse housing shapes worldwide.  Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination.



Gift	Description	Purpose	Appropriate Use	Contemporary Issues
Fourth	Two-inch cube divides into eight rectangles	Promotes “building” skills.	Use to teach how to create something from different smaller parts.	<p>Promotes math skills.</p> <p>Progressive activity with increasing difficulty.</p> <p>Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye–hand coordination.</p>
Fifth	Three-inch cube breaks into 27 one inch cubes; can divide into 39 pieces	Promotes “building” skills.	Use to prompt child’s powers of analysis.	<p>Promotes math skills.</p> <p>Progressive activity with increasing difficulty.</p> <p>Shows unity in diversity.</p> <p>Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye–hand coordination.</p>
Sixth	Three-inch cube divides into 36 different pieces	Promotes “building” skills.	Use to introduce the concept of division.	<p>Promotes math skills.</p> <p>Shows multiplicity and diversity of materials.</p> <p>Increases vocabulary.</p> <p>Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye–</p>

Gift	Description	Purpose	Appropriate Use	Contemporary Issues
				hand coordination.
				Promotes math skills.
Seventh	Flat wood colored square and triangular tablets, each 1 inch in length	Introduces realm of abstract; prepares child for drawing.	Use to develop the idea of pictures as representations.	Forces creativity and use of imagination.
Eighth	Sticks of same width, different lengths (plain or in primary colors)	Introduces straight line and concept of length.	Use to emphasize concepts of outlining and perimeter.	Introduces higher level math.
				Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination.
Ninth	Curved line or ring (1, 2 or 3 inches in diameter); can be divided into halves or quarters	Emphasizes the curve.	Use to introduce concept of circumference and edge of cylinder.	Introduces higher level math.
				Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination.
Tenth	The point (beans, seeds, beads, perforating paper)	Teaches that lines/solids are comprised of points.	Use to conclude the continuum from abstracts to solids.	Introduces higher level math.
				Develops dexterity, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination.

Gift	Description	Purpose	Appropriate Use	Contemporary Issues
				Mastery shows child is ready to draw.

*Note.* (Braun & Edwards, 1972; Wiggins & Smith, 1895).

The kindergarten movement spread to the United States in 1855 when one of Froebel's student teachers, Mrs. Carl Schurz, started a kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin. Mrs. Schurz met Elizabeth Peabody, a teacher and advocate from the wealthy Peabody family who advocated for and began her own kindergarten using the Frobelian techniques. In America, kindergarten became a beacon of hope in the social movement for the new influx of immigrants and the poor. In many ways, kindergarten financed by religious and philanthropic organizations was seen as the only social entity for residents of the growing slums as a way to bridge the gap of home and school through ministering to families (Braun & Edwards, 1972). Models of philanthropic kindergartens operating in slum areas included the Jackson Street Free Kindergarten and the Silver Street Kindergarten in San Francisco (Bryant & Clifford, 1992).

Peabody and her colleagues Horrace Mann, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Susan E. Blow opened the first publicly funded school kindergarten in 1873 in St. Louis (Braun & Edwards, 1972). There were many debates about the curriculum as kindergarten progressed in the public school system in the 1900s. Many sought to impose a rigidity that mimicked the first-grade curriculum, while others fought for Froebel's DAP. Kindergarten in America, however, seemed to enjoy absolute autonomy from the regular education system, as teachers with new ideas focused on the whole child, helping children to learn through play with creativity (Bryant &

Clifford, 1992). In 1960, with the release of *Why Johnny Can't Read* and Sputnik, change again knocked on the kindergarten door, much like in the 1800s when kindergarten was used to usher in another social movement of increasing school readiness among poor children. The kindergarten curriculum became water-downed versions of first grade, with direct verbal instruction and behavior modifications to quench the mounting pressure of society's concerns regarding the education of poor children (Bryant & Clifford, 1992).

This continued pressure to make kindergarten more rigorous so students could score higher on standardized tests was far from the aims of education that Piaget envisioned in his developmental philosophy. According to Elkind (1989), "Piaget's principal goal of education was to create men who were capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done—men who are creative, inventive, and discoverers." His second goal of education was to form minds that can be critical, verify, and not accept everything offered. Piaget viewed slogans, collective opinions, and ready-made trends of thought as great dangers that must be individually resisted, criticized, and distinguished between what is proven and what is not. Thus, students are needed who are active and learn early to find out by themselves—partly by their spontaneous activity and partly through material set up for them—and who learn early to tell what is verifiable and what is simply the first idea to come to them.

The NAEYC created position statements in the mid-1980s to guide educators on DAP in their programs for students up to 8 years of age. These DAP target the physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and cultural competencies of the student. DAP inform teachers to focus on three core dimensions: (a) the social and cultural contexts of the child, (b) the development and learning, and (c) individual experiences and characteristics when planning a curriculum for the students (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

This developmentally appropriate approach to learning was justified by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, as NCLB focused on what students should be learning instead of how are students learning. Legislative bills like President Bush's NCLB, President Clinton's Goals 2000, and reports like *A Nation at Risk* have placed undue pressure on and tied educators' hands when seeking to satisfy all the needs and demands of early childhood education. Goals 2000 (section 102-1) stated that all kindergarten students in America would have the necessary skills to start school. This school readiness emphasis made sense as the research highlights well-prepared students are more successful (Protheroe, 2006).

Bredenkamp and Copple (2009) pointed out that children who live in poverty with less-educated families tend to enter kindergarten with lower levels of math, reading, and language skills and with 60% lower cognitive scores than their affluent peers. White students' cognitive scores were 20% higher than African American students and 19% higher than Hispanic students, and these inequities and gaps over time have only increased. This concern to decrease the achievement gaps has prompted many educators to advocate and encourage politicians to act on behalf of low SES and ELL students.

### **History of Transition Kindergartens in California**

Before the 2012-13 school year, students who did not turn 5 years by August of the current school year had to enroll in a preschool program or wait for next year to enter kindergarten. This all changed with implementation of TK, which allowed students with a fifth birthday by December 2 of the current school year to enroll in our K-12 system. In 2010, California's then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act SB 1381, authored by State Senator Joseph Smithian. The law changed the kindergarten entry cutoff

so that children must turn 5 years old by September 1 instead of December 2 to enter Kindergarten. It phased in the new age requirement by moving the cutoff date back one month each year for three years beginning in the 2012-13 school year. SB 1381 also established a new grade level called TK.

TK is the first year of a two-year kindergarten program for students turning 5 years old between September 2 and December 2. All districts that offer a kindergarten classroom must also offer TK classes. K-12 credentialed teachers using a developmentally appropriate curriculum were able to teach TK students.

Cadigan et al. (2015) explored issues in TK implementation in California. The researchers examined parents' thoughts regarding TK, how they decided to enroll their students, and how school districts handled parent outreach. The researchers also examined the 2012-13 California Department of Education's CBEDS for 2012-13 for TK enrollment numbers. In the study, 51% of the students enrolled in TK were Hispanic or Latino, 38% were white, 5% were Asian, 3% were African American, 1% were Native American, 59% overall were eligible for free and reduced meals, and 41% overall were English language learners.

Cadigan et al. (2015) also conducted focus groups with the parents who enrolled their children in TK. These parents verbalized their appreciation for having the opportunity and another option of their children as opposed to keeping them home. The parents stated that finances were an important key to their children's enrollment as it was free, convenient, and would give their children a leg up in kindergarten. The researchers also found that full day programs were vital to working parents. Parents commented that families who did not enroll their children in TK were concerned that the program would be too for their children academically and would lack socialization opportunities.

In 2012-13 across California, 120 district administrators answered a survey regarding TK implementation in their districts as well as their outreach efforts to parents. About 91% of the administrators simply informed parents at kindergarten enrollment, and two-thirds of the districts took a more aggressive approach in marketing their TK program. The districts held various marketing strategies from sharing information with other community family care agencies, posting notices in the community, running advertisements, posting information on their districts website, and holding parent information sessions.

There were some challenges in recruiting students of parents who thought that TK was a remedial program. Some parents did not care for the school where the TK program was located. In other cases, some were unaware of the program and wanted their children to attend kindergarten and some chose other early education programs.

### **TK Structure**

American Institutes for Research (2015) conducted a study of 200 TK teachers and observations of 184 classrooms in 200 schools focused on the teachers, instruction, and classroom structure. Although the California law allows districts to place students in TK/K combination classes, only 25% of classrooms choose to do so, while 76% of the programs were standalone TK classrooms. Two-thirds of the classrooms were full-day, offering 6 hours of instruction; the remainder were half-day programs offering 3 hours of instruction. By statute, the minimum school day in Kindergarten is 3 hours/180 instruction minutes (EC 46110). EC 8973, however, allows schools that have adopted an early primary program (extended-day kindergarten or “full day”) to exceed 4 hours. Furthermore, EC 48000 states that a TK shall not be construed as a new program or higher level service requiring additional services or resources. In general, the number of required instructional minutes for TK is 36,000 minutes per year. The minimum

length of instructional time that must be offered to constitute a school day is 180 minutes (EC 46117 and 4620).

According to Edsource (2021), currently in the 20-21 school year, TK serves about 100,000 children, primarily those who turn five years between September 2 and December 2. These students narrowly miss the cutoff for regular kindergarten. By contrast, the new 2021, \$2.7 billion universal TK program will gradually be made available to every 4-year-old in California, eventually serving nearly 400,000 students. The program will essentially become California's version of a universal preschool program that is available to all children regardless of income. The program is expected to be rolled out beginning in the 2022-2023 school year and will expand annually until it is available to all the state's 4-year-olds by 2025-2026. The plan is to gradually phase in younger students each year. Some school districts are ahead of the curve, however, having already expanded TK to most four-year-olds.

The standalone TK classrooms averaged 20 students statewide, while the TK/K combinations averaged 24 students. The study estimated that only 25% of all TK students were in combination classes, while the majority were in standalone classrooms. Kindergarten classrooms, according to California Education Code-Sec 41376 & 41378, must have a maximum of 31 students and one teacher. TK students are four years old when they start the school term in August and may have more needs than the kindergarteners. Most districts placed a lower number of students in their TK classroom and added staffing assistance to their teachers ([cde.ca.gov](http://cde.ca.gov)).

According to AIR (2016), TK class sizes vary substantially from eight to 30 students in the study sample, with an average class size of 20 students statewide. This average is smaller than the size of the average California kindergarten classroom, which contained 23 students in 2014-15 (California Department of Education, n.d.). The average class size for a standalone TK



classroom was smaller, including 19 students, than a TK/K combination classroom, which includes 24 students.

According to Senate Bill 876 (SB 876), new teachers in TK classrooms must have a K-12 multiple subject teaching credential along with 24 units of Child Development or a child development permit. According to AIR (2015), 23% of the TK teachers taught preschool classes and 96% taught kindergarten in the past. The districts in this study hired teachers that had previous experience in early education to fill their TK positions.

On July 9, 2021, California's Governor Newsome signed budget trailer bill language for 2021 as part of AB 130. He revised the timespans for those mandatory and optional admittance requirements to be phased in from the 2022–23 school year to the 2025–26 school year. As a condition of receipt of apportionments, pupils in a TK program would be required to admit to a TK program maintained by the school district or charter school a child who had their fourth birthday by September 1. As a result, all 4-year-old students will be able to attend TK classes by the 2025-26 school year and, according to D'Souza (2021), this is keeping with President Biden's vision for universal preschool.

AIR (2017) uncovered differences in the instruction across content areas in the transitional kindergartens and the combination TK/K classrooms. The study discovered that, in the combination TK/K classes, 67% of the instruction time was dedicated to literacy and math, while standalone TK classes spent only 39% of the instruction on literacy and math. The TK classes spent more time on social-emotional learning, art, music, and social studies than the combination classes.

The California Department of Education (2008) developed the California Preschool Learning Foundations and Frameworks, which were intended to be used, followed, and aligned

to any TK curriculum and classroom implementing DAP. The TK/K combination classroom may use a curriculum aligned to kindergarten standards that follow more of a routine. In the standalone TK classrooms, children spend more time in settings aligned with DAP as set forth by the NAEYC as intended by the legislation.

In another critical area of the study by AIR (2016), the researcher conducted 184 observations of TK standalone and combination classrooms, which were conducted through the lenses of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Emerging Academics Snapshot observational tool (EASOT). The CLASS is an observational instrument used to assess classroom quality in PK-12 classrooms. CLASS was developed at the School Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning and captures the link between students' gains and teacher behaviors. The EASOT examined the didactic teaching methods or strategies used by the TK teachers (American Institutes For Research, 2016).

In 2021, California's Governor Gavin Newsom included early care and education in his May Revised budget by funding Senate Bill 130-Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) to the tune of \$2.7 billion. This bill expanded the current TK programs and will include all 4-year-old children by the 2025-26 school year. The new UTK will include children in school years 2021-22 turning 5 years old by 12/2/2022-23, turning 5 years old by 2/2/2023-24, turning 5 years old by 4/2/2024-25, and turning 4 years old by 6/2/2025-26. As a result, by 2025-26 school year, every 4-year-old child in California can attend UTK for free as the first year of public education. (D'Souza, 2021)

### **Assessment Tools Exploration**

AIR (2016) utilized the CLASS tool to evaluate the interactions between TK students and their teachers and examined the domains/areas of classroom management, instructional and

emotional support, and how the teachers gave it to their students. The study found that, overall, TK teachers provided their students with a moderate-high quality in emotional support and classroom organization domains. Although instructional support was much lower, it was consistent with other study trends using the CLASS tool.

The CLASS tool defines the domains of emotional support as an indicator of school readiness and the way in which children function socially and emotionally in the classroom as well as the teacher's ability to support them. The tool also measures the classroom's positive or negative climate and the teacher's sensitivity and regard for students' perspectives. Classroom organization includes all the processes of managing student behavior, time, and attention. It further measures behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning formats. Instructional support is grounded in research on the language development and cognition of young children. The tool focuses on the concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling (Pianta et al., 2012).

The Emerging Academics Snapshot observational tool is a time sampling observation instrument designed to describe children's exposure to instruction and engagement in academic activities as well as activities and adult responsive involvement. Adults' responsive involvement refers to teachers' approach to building positive relationships and participating with students in the classroom. Using this approach, teachers model language and interpret students' behaviors by providing positive reinforcement.

The Snapshot's unique contributions to previous observational instruments are informed by the teachers' engagement of the children and the children's engagement with academic activities sections (Ritchie et al., 2001). The results of the Snapshot tool revealed that 59% of the time, teachers in both the TK standalone and combination classroom used didactic teaching

strategies. Both sets of TK teachers used the more age-appropriate scaffolding strategy only 17% of the observed time. As a result, there were no significant differences between the instructional methods in the TK standalone and those in the TK/K combination (American Institutes For Research, 2016).

### **History of Preschool Education, Its Purposes, and Research**

Cahan (1989) stated, “one of the earliest recorded attempts to organize the education of the poorest children happened in England in 1698 with the charity school movement through the Society for the promotion of Christian Knowledge.” This movement and curriculum were religious with a small section of secular instruction. These educational opportunities were not, however, intended for the very young, as they became a concern in the Industrial Revolution.

In 1767, an Alsatian Lutheran pastor named Johann Friedrich Oberlin from Waldersbach founded the first infant school/hall of refuge or *salle d' asile* to care for field workers' young children. In cities like Paris, Lippe-Detmold, Kaiserswerth and Berlin educators open their own infant schools patterned by Oberlin. The name was changed to *écoles maternelles* in France around 1833 and became state supported (Britannica, 2016).

The launch of the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s created a need for young children's care, as many women left their homes to work in factories. Cahan (1989) quoted Florence Kelly, who stated, “industry affords in greater measure than the race has ever known before all those goods which form the material basis of life... while at the same time disintegrates the family, this is the Paradox of Modern Industry” (Kelley, 1941 p. 1). The lives of women and children were negatively affected by the Industrial Revolution. The infant schools were created with the primary goal of offering full-time care for the children of low-income families.

The first preschool was opened in Scotland in 1816 and was operated by Robert Owen and followed by Hungarian countess Teresa Brunsvik in 1823. Germany followed suit with Friedrich Froebel's Kindergarten in Germany which received worldwide fame, offering early education classes. England's nursery/infant school, an older term given to preschool classes that represent children ages 0 to 5 years, was opened in 1824. The need for these types of schools became important, as the law in England changed, preventing children from employment.

In 1844, the first crèche (day nursery) opened in the outskirts of Paris to combat infant mortality and safeguard the well-being of unsupervised toddlers. Companies sponsored these crèches so mothers could breast feed their babies while working. In Switzerland, Owen and Pestalozzi founded schools for young students which were influenced by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The schools were modeled after a home-like environment, and teaching principles influenced the infant schools' pedagogy in England (Cahan, 1989).

Early schooling in this period was categorized as babysitting or moral/religious training for adult living or social service. The enlightened Friedrich Froebel, the German father of Kindergarten and student of Pestalozzi, examined the stages of child development and created pedagogy for young children's teachers. He also recognized the importance of play in the lives and development of young children's. In 1816, Froebel's pedagogical institute opened in Keilhau, named "the valley of education" (Britannica, 2016).

Froebel opened his first kindergarten in 1837 in Bad Blankenburg and offered insight into the field of early education, which laid the foundation that lives on today. He created "gifts," or geometrical playthings used by young children to build the foundation for real life activities such as cutting, folding, and weaving. Today, young children use these geometrical "gifts" for laying the foundation to understanding algebra and geometry (Britannica, 2016).

Froebel's theory of how young children learn is still the bedrock of current early education pedagogy and his understanding that children learn through play and in environments that naturally encourage self-expression and discovery. In 1892, using Froebel as inspiration for pedagogy along with his gifts, Rosa and Carolina Agazzi opened a '*scuola maternal*' in Italy. In 1899, Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and a pioneer of early education, began to study mentally socially deprived children and their education. They utilized Froebel's methodology and became the director of Rome's Orthophrenic School (Britannica, 2016).

Dr. Montessori opened her first Children's House (*Casa dei Bambini*) in 1907 in Rome's slums, which housed 60 children. In 1907, psychologist Dr. Ovide Decroly opened his School of Hermitage (*E'cole de l'Ermitage*) in Belgium based on association of space and time, observation and expression (i.e., oral, written, manual, artistic). He did not allow his students to work alone like Dr. Montessori; instead, they worked in groups with articles from their everyday lives. He sought to ensure children were safe and protected from the ills of life.

Great Britain became the home of teacher training and supplier for Commonwealth of Britain and the United States when Grace Owen and Margaret McMillan opened their training centers in London, Manchester and Deptford. They offered a 3-year course as they believed only trained individuals should work with young children. They insisted that all housing developments should have a nursery school with trained staff focusing on the physical health and development of their students. In 1906, McMillan campaigned for the Provision of School Meals Act, and in 1908, created night camps for needy children with nutritious food and clean bedding (Britannica, 2016; Liebovich, 2016).

The U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (2015) stated, "I believe that every single child deserves the opportunity for a strong start in life through high-quality preschool, and

expanding those opportunities must be part of ESEA.” This statement resulted from the 2013 research by the National Institute for Early Education Research, which concluded that many low-income and minority children entering kindergarten were lacking social and academic skills, continuing a cycle of struggling to catch up (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This research illuminated equity issues regarding preschool or early education as well as the argument for significant federal and state investments. Studies show that high-quality preschool can eliminate the lag, beginning as early as infancy (Yazejian et al., 2015).

Due to the need for equity in early education, preschool became a household word in 1965, when President Johnson created the first publicly funded preschool program named Head Start. This half-day pilot preschool began in the summer and included health, support services, nutrition, and education components (K12 academics). Before this momentous occasion, preschool, day nurseries, and childcare were introduced in the United States in the 1830s to care for the poor children of working mothers, offering supervision and primary care (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007).

Michel (2011) stated that working American women in the past designed several types of care for their children, such as African American slaves singing white babies to sleep while their babies comforted themselves. Native Americans strapped their newborns to cradleboards or held them in slings, while migrant laborers and cannery workers kept their children next to them. At the same time, many had to leave their children with others and in unsafe conditions.

This countrywide need to help low-income mothers led many states to pass laws and policies. The U.S. Children’s Bureau’s research in 1920 regarding maternal and child labor proved the plight of children but refused to use federal support results. In 1933, the Emergency Nursery Schools (ENS) offered free part-day care for 75,000 children of unemployed parents

countrywide included an educational component. In 1941, Congress passed the Lanham Act and allocated 6 million dollars to convert ENS into childcare facilities. These advocacy efforts continued with passage of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and its \$825 million state allocation (Michel, 2011). Research studies have proven that all the investment made in early care and education pays forward the cost of future health, social, and special education services (Campbell et al., 2014).

One longitudinal, and most influential, study was the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina. According to Sparling and Meunier (2019), the Abecedarian Project was conducted in the 1970s as a rigorous randomized controlled trial (RCT) for children of disadvantaged families. The Abecedarian approach is popularly referred to as comprised of learning games, enriched caregiving, language priority, and conversational reading. This study followed students from preschool through adulthood. Follow-up studies on those students have revealed unexpected benefits like improved health, more equitable social decision-making, and reduced criminal behavior. Nobel Laureate Dr. James Heckman used the data from this study to calculate an economic investment return of 13.7% (Sparling & Meunier, 2019).

The 1960s Michigan's High/Scope Perry Preschool program was another longitudinal study conducted with follow-ups that revealed positive long-term results in earnings, better health and schoolings, and reduced crime involvement (Heckman, 2015). According to Schweinhart et al. (2005), the economic return to society from the study's participants was \$244,812 per participant on an investment of \$15,166 per participant.

Schmitt et al. (2014) suggested that English language learners benefit as much or more than other young children from early education experiences before attending kindergarten. Yazejian et al. (2015) reviewed various studies that showed early education programs benefit



immigrant students by increasing their math and reading scores and English proficiency. Dual language learners in early education programs have been shown to make the most progress, as English language skills are key predictors of later success in school and even in the labor market. Compared to English language learners who did not attend TK classes in an analysis of Statewide CDLDT data, TK classes have been shown to be useful for English language learners, as these students outscored and outperformed their non-TK counterparts in speaking and listening.

### **The Elements or Tenets of a Developmentally Appropriate TK**

#### **What is Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)?**

In 2020, the NAEYC, in its fourth edition of its position statement on DAP, stated, “Every child, birth through age eight, has the right to equitable learning opportunities-in centers, family child care homes, or schools-that fully support their optimal development and learning across all domains and content areas.” Further, children are born eager to learn; they take delight exploring their world and making connections. The degree to which early learning programs support children’s delight and wonder in learning reflects the setting’s quality. The educators who choose to engage in DAP foster young children’s joyful learning and maximize each child’s opportunity to achieve their full potential (NAEYC, 2020). According to Charlesworth (1998),

A quality pre-kindergarten would be one that uses DAP which emphasizes the whole child (physical, social, emotional, and cognitive), while taking into account gender, culture, disabilities, socioeconomic status, family factors and any other important elements in order to meet the individual child's needs, developmental level and learning style.

The term DAP was first coined and developed by the NAEYC in 1987 through a position statement. There has been unanimity for the past 30 years in early education around the NAEYC position statement on DAP for children birth to eight years. Since the statement’s introduction, it

has served as a guide for the field as well as on this new phenomenon of formalizing a new set of beliefs that the NAEYC used to overhaul the best practices in early education (Dickerson, 2002).

The position statement was created through the NAEYC Accreditation process for early education programs. These programs seeking to become accredited needed to exhibit DAP, but there were no written guidelines for them to follow. There was also a growing trend pressuring early educators to use kindergarten curriculum to present formal academic instruction to young children (Charlesworth, 1998). Although it was not spelt out as DAP, Froebel (1887) laid a foundation to meet young children's needs with a child-centered approach focusing on their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

Copple and Bredekamp (2009) stated that the DAP in the NAEYC position statement was not based on what we think might be true or what we want to believe about young children, but was instead informed by what we know from theory and literature regarding how children develop and learn. DAP require that children are met where they are; therefore, teachers must get to know them well, enabling them to reach goals that are challenging and achievable. DAP does not mean making things easier for children, but rather, it means ensuring goals and experiences are suited to their learning and development and are challenging enough to promote their progress and interests.

According to Bredekamp (1987), the concept of developmental appropriateness has two dimensions: (a) age appropriateness and (b) individual appropriateness. The NAEYC developed DAP on the premise of five basic guidelines for teachers to practice:

1. Create a caring community of learners: DAP support the development of relationships between adults and children, among children, among teachers, and between families and teachers.

2. Teach to enhance development and learning: early childhood teachers strive to achieve a balance between guiding children's learning and following their lead.
3. Construct appropriate curriculum: the content of early childhood curriculum includes the subject matter, social or cultural values, parents' input, and the age and experience of the children.
4. Assess children's learning and development: assessment of individual children's development and learning is essential for planning and implementing appropriate curriculum.
5. Establish mutually beneficial relationships with families: developmentally appropriate practices evolve from a deep knowledge of individual children and the context within which they develop and learn. The younger the child, the more necessary it is for teachers to acquire this knowledge through relationships with children families.

In the revised NAEYC position statement, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) included 12 researched-based guiding principles to facilitate decisions in early education:

1. All domains of development and learning (i.e., physical, social and emotional, and cognitive) are important and are closely interrelated. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.

2. Many aspects of children's learning and development follow well-documented sequences, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.
3. Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child's individual functioning.
4. Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience.
5. Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child's development and learning, and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur.
6. Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacity.
7. Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.
8. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
9. Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a variety of ways; thus, a wide range of teaching strategies and interactions are effective to supporting all these kinds of learning.

10. Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition, and social competence.
11. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery and also when there are many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.
12. Children's experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning, such as persistence, initiative, and flexibility; in turn, these dispositions and behaviors affect their learning and development.

According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), while the list is comprehensive, "it certainly is not all inclusive. There is no linear listing of principles that can do justice to the complexity of the phenomena that is child development and learning." DAP is grounded in the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness. From this knowledge base, it is known how children develop and learn and what approaches and conditions work best for them (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Charlesworth et al. (1993) stated that a number of national professional organizations have agreed on the definitions of DAP and hold a common tenet that DAP fit the developmental stages of young children respective to their individuality, age, cultural heritage, and family. Further, DAP provide them with an environment to construct knowledge through concrete authentic experiences. These organizations are the International Reading Association, National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the Southern Association on Children Under Six.

## **Who is the Developmentally Appropriate Teacher?**

Teachers of young students play a critical role in shaping our democracy and citizenry's future. They provide respectful, consistent, and compassionate relationships that scaffold the learning foundation for their students. Teachers who utilize DAP practices are multifaceted in planning curriculum, enhanced teaching, assessments of student development, establishing students' familial relationships, and creating a community of learners (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). Young children benefit when teachers utilize DAP in their teaching, as these teachers understand their students and meet them where they are.

Unlike other school readiness programs in California, TK programs have been included in and funded by the K-12 system and, therefore, by law, are equipped with K-12 credentialed teachers. Clifford et al. (2005) stated, "teacher education and well-trained teachers are critical to early childhood programs." This could also potentially be a downside to this good fortune, as many K-12 credentialed teachers with iron-clad union contracts and tenure rights may not have early education or school readiness backgrounds and experience. Therefore, they may be ill-prepared to teach young children aged four and five years old. Bredekamp (1987) stated that early childhood educators should have practical classroom or supervised experience regardless of their credentials before they can be in charge of a classroom of young children because what and how they teach determines how young children learn.

Ramey and Ramey (2004) stated that it was an omen for American society that for the past 20 years kindergarten teachers have indicated that one-third of the students entering kindergarten are deemed not ready for kindergarten level academia. This has led to students being unprepared and, because of this, a greater emphasis has been placed on the pre-kindergarten experience. An understanding of this DAP tenet could be the most important

because, according to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), DAP are at the core of excellent teaching. An excellent teacher is one who is intentional in all aspects of their role, teaching to enhance development and learning and creating a caring community of learners. An educator who adopts DAP should be equipped with a working knowledge and understanding of brain development and its correlation to student learning.

Zull (2002), in his book *The Art of Changing the Brain*, stated, “there was a bridge between biology and pedagogy and that teaching is the art of changing the brain.” The brain operates by physical and chemical laws and teaching and learning is physical. Although teachers could not physically get inside and rewire a student’s brain, they could set up conditions that favored the rewiring of the brain and create environments to nurture it. Teaching can eventually become an applied science of the brain (Zull, 2002).

Perry (2009) agreed that a child’s brain is flexible in early childhood and receptive to environmental input. Children exposed to consistent, predictable, nurturing, and enriched experiences develop neurobiological capabilities that increase their chances for health, happiness, creativity, and productivity (Perry & Hambrick, 2008). As a result, providing a delicate balance of an atmosphere that combines a sense of low threat with a significant challenge and a degree of relaxation builds students’ character to be confident and at ease with themselves (Caine & Geoffrey, 1990). Teachers should also support their students’ social and emotional development through prosocial behavior and attitudes, social interaction, and self-regulatory skills (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). Therefore, the DAP educator has blended and endorsed the science of brain development and the principles set in the revised NAEYC position statement to create a child-centered approach focused on the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional needs of each student (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

## **DAP Theoretical Background**

Authors and advocates of DAP have claimed that young children learn by doing and that maturation provides an academic framework for learning. The works of Piaget, Erickson, and Montessori revealed that the complex process of learning results from children's experiences with the external world and their thinking (Bredekamp, 1987). Bredekamp and Copple (2009) stated that Piaget believed that pretend play strengthens newly acquired abilities to picture different situations mentally and allows children to take control of experiences in which they little or no control in real life, such as going to the doctor or getting lost at the store. Vygotsky (1978) saw dramatic play with its system of roles and rules (i.e., who does what and what is allowed in the play scenario) as uniquely supportive of self-regulation. Children's eagerness to play motivates them to attend to and operate with its structure, conforming to what is required by other players and the play scenario. Critics challenged these notions are a derisory theory and are not relevant in today's society, and therefore moved away from the Piagetian approach to a Vygotskian socio-cultural perspective (Smith, 1996).

Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) stated that Piaget in his youth escaped his mother's unpredictability by adopting his father's logical world of reason and science. This logico-mathematical style to education was more acceptable to the United States of America than Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which was accepted by the rest of the world, as Piaget's theory of scientific and mathematic learning matched with America's ambition to lead the world in space. Smith (1996) stated that although DAP authors cite Vygotsky and Piaget, they ignore much of Vygotsky's cultural and social context and focus on Piaget's cognitive constructivism, placing a lack of attention to cultural issues and strong empirical studies.



Many critics believe that there are greater cultural and socio-emotional issues amongst young children than cognitive issues. O'Brien (2006) voiced concern, stating that support for DAP comes from "a white middle class perspective" and works best for students from that environment. Further, students from low SES and other non-mainstream cultural backgrounds may not have the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions that allow them to benefit from the DAP. She cited Sally Lubeck (1996), who stated, "When the cultural beliefs and practices of one group are obscured in scientific claims regarding how all children should optimally learn and develop, psychology becomes a guise for dominant ideology." As a result, non-mainstream families and teachers believed that their students needed educational practices with a more direct approach for success in society and schools. The dominance of white middle class female early educators working with an increased diverse population can be problematic in their "indoctrination" of DAP into education (O'Brien, 2006).

Han (2010) conducted a two-phase study in the southeastern United States among five school districts. The researchers sought to investigate white American kindergarten teachers' beliefs regarding culture and children's social competence development. In the first phase, the researcher investigated if the teachers differentiated a student's social competence depending on their cultural/racial heritage. In the second phase, they investigated the teachers' characteristics regarding social competence and culture (Han, 2010). Han concluded that, from a social competence view, the teachers had very little understanding of young children's social competence and had varying degrees of cultural knowledge for different cultural/racial groups like Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans, from the most to the least. In addition, several insights, such as teachers' personal beliefs about social competence, represented low-context cultural beliefs emerged through qualitative individual interviews. These beliefs included the

following: teachers' major source of cultural knowledge was professional experience and teachers' beliefs regarding multicultural education revealed color-blind teaching. Taken together, the findings of this study have implications for practice in early childhood teacher education, including the idea that institutional support should be in place to provide teachers with opportunities to become aware of their own identities and beliefs. O'Brien (2006) contended that teachers must see children as dynamic, culturally contexted persons deserving of a curriculum that would meet their individual needs, experiences, and interests. Delpit (1995) stated that we all have cultural lenses through which we see the world, and these lenses operate at the subconscious level, making the way we see the world "just the way it is."

Although DAP authors quote the influence of Vygotsky, it is most obvious that Piaget's influence played a greater role in its development. Constructivism was the brain child of Jean Piaget, and almost all early educators in America have been schooled in this theory. O'Brien (2006) stated that a constructivist believes that our senses give incomplete information about the world and, in order to create mental understanding or schema of the physical inputs we receive, must be structured to create mental understanding. The learner must ask their own questions for learning to be meaningful and teaching is at its best when opportunities for exploration with ideas and objects are provided.

Teaching must reject the idea that learning and understanding will result by simply the offering of information. Although there are many segments of constructivism, it is a theory about learning and knowledge that blends cognitive psychology, philosophy, and anthropology and defines knowledge as subjective because it is socially and culturally mediated, developmental, and temporary. In a critique to the constructivist approach of DAP, O'Brien cited Canella and Reiff (1994), who stated, "different cultural groups construct forms of knowledge, ways of

thinking, values, and perspectives on the world that fit physical and social circumstance and this approach argues against general cognition skills, proposing that socio-cultural factors channel cognition.”

### **What Are the DAP Assessments in Early Education?**

There are many available assessments that can be used in the early education classroom. Brown (2009) claimed that child developmental theory is the bedrock of DAP in the classroom, focusing on the development and growth across all the developmental domains of young children. Educators must use a developmental approach when assessing students. In the first edition of the book *Developmentally Appropriate Practices*, The NAEYC offered Developmental Evaluation of Children as one tenet to the early learning field. The NAEYC stated that assessing each child’s development and learning was essential for planning and implementing DAP and curriculum, and the instruments used should be valid and reliable (Bredekamp, 1986). In 2009, in the revised edition of the book, the NAEYC expanded its stance on assessments by adding three more specific and beneficial tenets/purposes: (a) Assessments assist teachers and families in monitoring their students' progress, (b) Assessments should be used to evaluate and improve teaching instruction, and (c) Effectiveness and the screening and diagnosis of children with disabilities or developmental needs, or exceptional learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

Due to the newfound importance placed on “school readiness,” many governmental and private organizations are also fast-forwarding the development of educational programs to be used in early education classrooms. The implementation of these programs also fueled the conversation of quality monitoring and accountability. The NCLB mandated tracking progress and outcomes in programs and tied it to the program’s funding. According to National Research

Council (2001), assessment and instruction are inseparable parts of effective pedagogy. Because young children’s developmental status changes frequently, the results of assessments—especially standardized tests— can misrepresent their learning. These misrepresented results can be punitive to many programs through the push of high stakes testing brought on by the pressure of NCLB. As a result, emphasis should be placed on the analyst, who reports and interprets the assessment results, and the teachers’ training on assessing the students.

In 2006, with funding from the United States Health and Human Services- Office of Head Start, the United States Congress requested a study conducted by the National Research Council (NCR) on the quality and purposes of different techniques and instruments for developmental assessments on young children, along with the identification of important outcomes for children birth to 5 years old (National Research Council, 2008). While the elementary system expects children to learn the rigor of content standards, they focus on the use of assessment scores to measure and mark success (Guskey, 2001). From preschool to high school, accountability measures cause tension for educators that stem from educational policies as they balance DAP and best practices with assesment implications (Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008).

Students in TK classrooms have always been assessed with instruments to measure their academic success and improvement. In TK, emphasis is placed on “school readiness” and a development approach to learning and teaching. Assessing TK students with measurement tools that focus only on academic success is not consistent with the tenets of developmentally appropriate goals and education. Teachers must also be sensitive to young children’s cultural influences and take consideration in choosing pedagogical strategies and interpreting assessments. Many African American and Native American children may not have the same

social cues or verbal language as the dominant culture, which could lead to misunderstanding in developmental areas (Assessment in Early Childhood Education, 2001).

Assessment tools must examine goals related to the development and readiness of preschool children. Educators should be cautious about implementing a readiness assessment program without paying careful attention to the assessment quality. Program leaders should evaluate assessments for their effectiveness in prediction and intervention, and their purpose and logical intent should match their design administered by highly trained professionals (National Research Council, 2001).

According to Assessment in Early Childhood Education (2001), all assessments— and particularly assessments for accountability— must be used carefully and appropriately if they are to resolve and not create educational problems. Assessment of young children poses greater challenges than people generally realize. The first five years of life are a time of incredible growth and learning, but the course of development is uneven and sporadic. The status of a child’s development as of any given day can change very rapidly. Consequently, assessment results—in particular, standardized test scores that reflect a given point in time— can easily misrepresent children’s learning.

The CLASS assessment is an observation tool measuring teacher–child interactions and is divided into three domains and 10 dimensions.

1. Emotional Support has four dimensions: Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives.
2. Classroom Organization has three dimensions: Behavior Management, Productivity, and Instructional Learning Format.

3. Instructional Support has three dimensions: Concept Development, Quality of Feedback, and Language Modeling.

Several multi-state and national research studies have used the CLASS assessment, proving its validity and reliability (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Pianta et al., 2005; Raver et al., 2008). Table 2 shows assessment tools used in early education classrooms and research studies.

**Table 2**

*Assessment Tools Used in Early Education Classrooms and Research Studies*

Assessment tools	Author	The Use
The Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) <sup>©</sup>	Developed by the California Department of Education, with assistance from Berkeley, the Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research (BEAR) the Desired Results Access Project at Napa County Office of Education, and WestEd’s Center for Child & Family Studies (CCFS)	The Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) <sup>©</sup> is a developmental continuum from early infancy to kindergarten entry. It is a formative assessment instrument for young children and their families used to inform instruction and program development

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	CLASS was developed in 2008 by education researchers at the University of Virginia’s Center for Advanced Studies in Teaching and Learning (CASTL) to scientifically capture the essence of great teaching.	CLASS is an observational tool that provides a common lens and language focused on what matters—the classroom interactions that boost student learning. Data from CLASS™ observations are used to support teachers’ unique professional development needs, set school-wide goals, and shape system-wide reform at the local, state, and national levels.” CLASS focuses on effective teaching, helps teachers recognize and understand the power of their interactions with students, aligns with professional development tools, [and] works across age levels and subjects. The three domains are Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support.
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Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA)	ELSA was developed by HIGHSCOPE	ELSA is an authentic assessment in the form of a children’s storybook. It is a generic instrument designed to measure the emerging literacy skills of children
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attending early childhood programs — including but not limited to programs using HighScope educational approach. The ELSA measures the four key principles of early literacy – Comprehension, Phonological Awareness, Alphabetic Principle, and Concepts About Print.

Brigance “The  
BRIGANCE® Head  
Start/Early Head  
Start System

Curriculum Associates

The BRIGANCE® Head Start/Early Head Start System helps programs screen children, monitor each child’s progress, plan developmentally appropriate instruction, and ensure that each child is prepared for Kindergarten

Devereux Early  
Childhood  
Assessment (DECA)

Devereux Advanced Behavioral  
Health

DECA “is a nationally normed assessment of within-child protective factors in preschool children aged two to five. Based on resilience theory, this comprehensive system is made up of a 5-step system designed to support early childhood teachers, mental health professionals, and parents in their goal of helping children



develop healthy social/emotional skills  
and reduce challenging behaviors

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The SDQ was developed by the English child psychiatrist Robert N. Goodman. The questionnaire assesses emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents

(SDQ) is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire about 3-16 year olds. It exists in several versions to meet the needs of researchers, clinicians and [educators]. All versions of the SDQ ask about 25 attributes, some positive and others negative. These 25 items are divided between 5 scales: (a) emotional symptoms (5 items), (b) conduct problems (5 items), (c) hyperactivity/inattention (5 items), (d) peer relationship problems (5 items), and (e) prosocial behaviour (5 items).

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Revised) [ECERS-R)

There are several Environment Rating Scales that have been developed through University of North Carolina that are commonly used by the varying preschool types

The Third Ed. of ECERS is a major revision that introduces innovations in both the content and administration of the scale while retaining the continuity of the two principal characteristics of the ECERS, namely its comprehensive or global definition of quality and the reliance on observation as the primary source of information on which to base assessment of classroom quality. The Scale consists of 35 items organized into 6 subscales: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and

### **Early Education Developmentally Appropriate Practices Research and Teacher Perception**

As the discussion on DAP and school readiness in TK was framed, it is necessary to identify and investigate the research written on both subjects. TK is unique because it not a preschool program; it was, however, designed through legislation to be a first year preparatory “school readiness” kindergarten class using DAP for students ages 4 and 5 years old before they enter traditional kindergarten. Thus, for many of those students, TK is their first school readiness opportunity.

The concept of school readiness was bolstered as many kindergarten teachers consistently report that approximately one third of the students entering kindergarten are not ready to do the work expected in kindergarten (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Emphasizing school readiness is important, as research shows that well-prepared students entering kindergarten are more successful than their unprepared peers (Protheroe, 2006). Researchers do sometimes intermingle pre-kindergarten and preschool when discussing school readiness preparations for students transitioning into traditional kindergarten. Still, the current study investigated TK, or prekindergarten, and school readiness DAP and teacher beliefs.

Charlesworth et al. (1993) stated that conventional research on teaching has focused on practice, ignoring the thought processes of teachers. Isenberg (1990) believed that researchers’ important task is to collaborate with practitioners to identify their beliefs and translate them into standards of practice. The author pointed out that the research on teacher thinking indicates that there are inconsistencies between teachers’ beliefs and practices that need to be identified so

teachers can be supported in reflecting upon and analyzing their beliefs as they relate to practice. Isenberg concluded, after reviewing the research, that it is important to focus more research on teachers' beliefs as they relate to practice. Information is needed not only on reported practice; it is also important to observe and report how it relates to belief (Pajares, 1992). Thus, many misconceptions regarding the usefulness of DAP and didactic practices are held by teachers in early childhood classrooms (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

Pianta and LaParo (2003) stated that a national study of 3,500 kindergarten teachers reported that one third of their students had problems transitioning to school, and another one fifth had difficulty adjusting marked with serious concerns. When asked to identify the specific problems and difficulties, about 46% of the teachers reported that 50% of the students could not follow directions. Thirty-six percent of the teachers reported that over 50% of their class lacked academic skills, 35% had a disorganized home environment, 34% had difficulty working independently, 31% lacked formal preschool, 20% had difficulty working in a group, 20% had poor social skills and immaturity, and 14% had communication problems. Teachers from urban SES districts reported even higher percentages. These findings show that kindergarten teachers accentuate task-oriented and social skills along with academic skills as indications of their students school readiness.

A number of research studies have revealed the long-term effects of the DAP and the DIP experience on young children as well as teachers beliefs and their practices in the DAP classrooms with mixed results. Wen et al. (2011) stated that, in the 1990s, studies were conducted with two scales: the Teacher Belief Scale (TBS) and the Instructional Activities Scale. These scales were based on the NAEYC DAP guidelines developed by Charlesworth et al. (1991)

and were used to assess 113 kindergarten teachers' self-reported curriculum beliefs and self-reported teaching practices.

The results of the study by Wen et al. (2011) revealed a moderate correlation ( $r = .63$ ) between the self-reported DAP beliefs and practices and a stronger correlation ( $r = .71$ ) between self-reported DIP and practices. The TBS and the Instructional Activities Scale were widely used in national and international studies based on the 2009 NAEYC DAP guidelines to measure teachers' beliefs and DAP practices.

A study of 60 kindergarten, first grade, and preschool teachers also found correlations between belief and practice for the preschool and kindergarten teachers but not for the first-grade teachers, who focused on didactic skills. Almost all of the teachers indicated that their programs were centered around didactic learning coupled with pressure from student parents; they could not implement DAP (Stipek & Byler, 1997). McMullen et al. (2006) compared teachers' beliefs to their observed practices and indicated when emergent literacy, language development activities, and child-centered freeplay were observed, DAP were aligned to the teachers' self-reported beliefs. Observations made of didactic learning practices, preplanned lessons, organized classroom routines, and academic-oriented teaching beliefs were endorsed (Wen et al., 2011).

Although DAP has had widespread appeal and acceptance for its positive effects on student learning, there has also been some criticism of DAP and questions regarding the appropriateness and claims of its practice. Many believe that DAP favor middle class white students while didactic DIP are better suited to teach students with a lower SES. Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) shared that research on teachers' beliefs and practices is complex because didactic and DAP are framed in the literature as completely dichotomous, and teacher practices are portrayed in the extremes rather than an existing continuum. This, according to the

authors, resulted from the original DAP statement with examples of DAP and DIP. In examining this complexity, the authors conducted a large retention study of 34 kindergarten teachers to examine their beliefs regarding DAP and the role of external pressures, curriculum constraints, and high stakes testing in shaping their beliefs.

The authors utilized surveys, interviews, and observations to study the 34 teachers from seven southeastern rural school districts located around a large university town and a major metropolitan area with a population of 40,344, with 13.3% of the residents under the poverty level and 8% under 5 years old. Nineteen-percent of the children who were non-European were in K-12, and 13.3% were African Americans. Thirty-four kindergarten teachers in the study represented an entire population of kindergarten teachers in the districts, and their overall teaching experiences were between 1 and 32 years ( $M = 11.94$ ;  $SD = 8.86$ ). The teachers' kindergarten teaching experience ranged from 1 to 23 years ( $M = 7.57$ ;  $SD = 7.13$ ) and the number of years of all teachers in the school system had a  $M = 7.10$  and  $SD = 6.12$ . Regarding their education, 18 teachers reported holding a bachelor's degree, and the other 16 had a master's degree along with their bachelor's.

The kindergarten teachers in this study were placed into three subgroups with nine of them classed as teacher directed (didactic), another nine as child centered (DAP), and 16 in a combination of both DAP and didactic based on the answers they gave regarding their instructional practices. Regardless of their subgroups, they all believed that there was a major shift from developmental to academic in kindergarten. They compared the present kindergarten class to first grade class in the past and commented that, in preparation for first grade, children needed learning skills instead of social skills, thus placing pressure on the students by covering extensive curriculum and not allotting enough time for fun activities.

The teachers themselves also felt a self-imposed and an overt pressure in their students' preparation. The self-imposed pressure was described as good by one teacher because it kept them accountable for their student learning. The overt pressure, however, was brought on by the criticism of the first grade teachers. The teachers in the DAP classes described more of the pressure to prepare their students than the teachers in the didactic group. Only three of the teachers in the didactic group felt the pressure of student preparations, as the others commented that knowing the expectations of the first grade teachers helped them to prepare and teach their students (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

About 17 kindergarten teachers felt no pressure and stated that working closely and communicating with the first grade teachers could help bolster any pressure they experienced. A number of the teachers also said that the county's retention policy of retaining students only once also helped with removing the pressure. The students would be retained if they struggled in first grade and given a double dose of academics as they were only promoted if they are able to succeed. The teachers also noted that the county had control over the curriculum, leaving only three of didactic group who perceived that they had control over the curriculum. Almost all of the DAP teachers perceived that they had the freedom and control over their instructional practices. In conclusion, many of the teachers, regardless of their instructional practices, felt that all students benefit from DAP, but that DAP were not practiced in their classrooms.

If given a choice, teachers will choose DAP, as one teacher in the didactic group pointed out that it was "easier for [them] to be teacher directed." Another teacher agreed, stating, "I have read a lot about child-centered and I think they are great, but I wouldn't know how to do it. It takes a lot of work from the teacher [and you have] to provide a lot of materials." The researchers stated that when teachers perceive they have the professional freedom to make

instructional decisions, they will use child centered, DAP strategies. The pressure felt in preparing their students for the next level, however, drove teachers, as one pointed out that “we have to do teacher-centered to get them ready for 1<sup>st</sup> grade.” The teachers were not totally aware of the research centered around instructional approaches and their benefits to students (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The current study was a qualitative study of TK classrooms and their teachers. The study was driven by the research questions noted above and designed as a collection of case studies (Light et al., 1990) of TK teachers in their respective classrooms who work in two school districts. Baxter and Jack (2008) quoted Yin (2003), who stated a case study design should be considered when (a) the focus of the study is to answer how and why questions, (b) the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study, and (c) the researcher seeks to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study. A hallmark of case study research is the use of multiple data sources, a strategy that also enhances data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). According to Stake (1995), “Qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what the experience itself would convey” (p. 39).

This dissertation was a multiple-case study (Yin, 2003) or a collective case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995), as there were a number of TK teachers participating in the research. Stake (1995) noted that a case study is singular, but it has subsections (e.g., classrooms), groups (e.g., teachers), occasions (e.g., workdays), representing a concatenation of domains—many so complex that, at best, they can only be sampled (p. 239). Holistic case studies call for the examination of these complexities. This case study was written in narrative form, and the researcher was primarily concerned with providing the reader with insight and understanding of this unique case. The outcome of a rich narrative text describing the classroom



activities and beliefs of the TK teachers was dependent upon careful, organized, and flexible data collection.

### **The Purposeful Sample of Teachers**

The teachers interviewed and observed were TK teachers in their classrooms at various school sites where the TK classes are located in two school districts in the same county in Northern California with a high percentage of minority students and students receiving free and reduced lunch. The percentage of free and reduced-price meals and English language learners of this district are higher than the county. The data collected were analyzed using qualitative research methods, which are discussed in the Analysis section. District #1 was the largest and most diverse school district in the county with over 50% receiving free and reduced lunches/meals. The District includes 17 elementary schools and operates 18 TK classes in 12 school sites strategically placed throughout the District to allow families easy access to the classes. Table 3 summarizes the total District and TK student demographic data from District #1, while Table 4 presents the number of students from both districts who receive free and reduced-price lunches/meals.

**Table 3**

*District and TK Student Demographic Data*

Ethnicity	District Total Number of Students	Grade TK
African American	2985 (14.02%)	28 (9.69%)
American Indian/Alaska Native	81 (0.38%)	0

Asian	1237 (5.81%)	20 (6.92%)
Filipino	1913 (8.98%)	22 (7.61%)
Hispanic or Latino	9425 (44.28%)	127 (43.94%)
Pacific Islander	240 (1.13%)	3 (1.04%)
White	3491 (16.49%)	55 (19.03%)
Two or more races	1865 (8.76%)	33 (11.76%)
Not reported	50 (0.23%)	0
Total	21287	289

**Table 4**

*District # 1 and District # 2 and the County EL & Free and Reduced –price Counts*

District/County	Student Enrollment	Free & Reduced meals	English Learners	TK Enrollment
District # 1	20,703	11,559 (55.8%)	3026 (14.6%)	289
District # 2	4526	1076 (23.8%)	124 (2.7%)	64
County	61,029	30,237 (49.5%)	7661 (12.6%)	761

*Note.* DataQuest: 2020-21 from CDE (2020)

This study of TK teachers in District #1 recognized the importance of early education in the life of students from a very diverse background (Merriam, 2009). The researcher chose this district because of its demographics and its leadership’s commitment to Early Childhood Education, as stated in its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). The second school,

District #2, is the smallest in the county with fewer than 5,000 students. It is the least diverse but just as committed to early education as District #1.

**Table 5**

*District 2 Enrollment*

Student Ethnicity	Total Number of Students	Total Number of TK students
African American	290- 6.41%	1-1.56%
American Indian/Alaska Native	16- 0.35%	0
Asian	215- 4.75%	6- 9.375%
Filipino	321- 7.09%	5- 7.81%
Hispanic or Latino	918- 20.28%	9- 14.06%
Pacific Islander	11- 0.24%	1- 1.56%
White	2017- 44.56%	26- 40.63%
Two or more races	738- 16.31%	16- 25%
Totals	4526	64

I conducted and recorded observations of each teacher’s class while they taught, and afterwards conducted a one-on-one interview with each teacher. I was situated in the least obstructive position in the classroom as not to affect any of the classroom activities. Both the teachers and their classrooms were given a pseudonym, comprising the multiple case study

research project. Each data source is one piece of the puzzle, with each piece contributing to the researcher's understanding of the whole phenomenon. This convergence of case studies adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

As a researcher, I had the great privilege and obligation: the privilege to pay attention and the obligation to make conclusions drawn from meaningful research to colleagues and clients. As data are collected and analyzed, researchers may also wish to integrate a process of member checking, where the researchers' interpretations of the data are shared with the participants, and the participants have the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Accordingly, I shared my observations with the TK teachers so that they had the opportunity to clarify and offer differing views regarding my findings.

Through these case studies, I explored the practices, thinking, and explanations of the TK teachers who accepted the invitation to join the study in their classrooms during a portion of the day. Through this study, I sought the meanings of these teachers regarding their practices in their classrooms. According to Merriam (2002), quoting Patton (1985),

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting- what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting.... The analysis strives for depth of understanding.

I treated each of the teachers and their classrooms as a case. The results of the analysis of the data from interviewing and observing all of the TK teachers resulted in multiple case studies. I described and explored issues of teaching and learning in this bounded system of individuals in

these classroom settings (Cresswell, 2013). According to Yin (1981, 1989), “Single-case design, in brief, also investigates and seeks understanding of a complex contemporary social phenomenon within real-life context.” This study allowed me to observe and examine if and how the explanations offered by TK teachers are aligned with their beliefs and practices of how their young students learn in their classrooms as well as how their practices are aligned with DAP. DAP also seem congruent with “constructivist” ideas regarding children’s learning, as young children actively engage in making their own understanding from their daily experiences. They also actively construct knowledge or understand concepts through their own activities acting as doers and thinkers instead of receiving the answers from their teachers. As young children are encouraged to solve problems, observe and predict results, listen to and use language, manipulate objects, and collaborate with their peers, their own concerns and motivations become important in forming their learning.

### **Interviews and Observations**

I conducted an interview before each observation and then a post interview of the TK teachers in the two districts. Observations are considered the best source of information for understanding social interactions, classroom behaviors, and teachers’ ability to promote these actions (Downer et al., 2010). Kawulich (2005) quoted Erlandson et al. (1993), who stated, “Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a ‘written photograph’ of the situation under study.” DeMunck and Sobo (1998) described participant observation as the primary method used by anthropologists doing fieldwork. Fieldwork involves active looking improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience and the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study” (Marshall & Rossman,

1989, p. 79). Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) defined participant observations as the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the participants under study in their natural setting through observations of those activities. Observations provide the context for development of sample guidelines and interview guides. Schensul et al. (1999) defined participant observation as the process of learning through exposure to the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting (g. 91).

Baxter and Jack (2008) stated that qualitative case studies are an approach to research that facilitate exploration of a phenomenon within its context of using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses, which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (p. 544). Therefore, using both an observation tool and teacher interviews lent several lenses to the research regarding the events that took place in these classrooms.

In defining the characteristics of a qualitative study, Stake (1995) stated it is “holistic, empirical, interpretive, and empathic.” The observations and immediate interpretations of qualitative studies are validated. It is non hortatory, resisting the exploitation of the specialist’s platform, and is sensitive to the risks of human subjects’ research. Further, its researchers are not just methodologically competent and versed in some substantive discipline, but rather are versed in the relevant disciplines. This study aligned and agreed with Stake (1995) and Baxter and Jack’s (2008) definitions to embody and orient towards a holistic understanding of the new phenomenon called TK in California classrooms. Feagin et al. (1991) stated “A case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed.”

My experience in TK classrooms in northern California assisted me as the researcher of this study, as I had the opportunity to lead the work in developing TK in the school district in

which I am employed. I strove to provide an empathetic understanding of the data collected and analyzed in this study and I hoped to focus on the processes of the classrooms and understand the human experiences underway in these classrooms. I was involved directly with the subjects by observing and interviewing them in their natural setting. In this way, I could better observe and tell the story of what happened without drawing attention to myself. My analysis of the data assisted in my understanding of TK in this one district. From the findings of the study, I was able to observe (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences in those classrooms.

Patton (1990) suggested that researchers use more than one method of data collection in order to improve the quality of research findings and data. Therefore, I chose to utilize observations of the classroom and interviews with the teachers as data sources. The teacher interviews were focused on what was observed in the classroom, and I digitally recorded the interviews. A professional transcribing company transcribed the data from each of the TK teachers. I, the researcher, then undertook the analysis of these data and sought out patterns, similarities, and topics/themes amongst them.

Each classroom teacher and classroom was provided its own unique pseudonym along with its classroom observation notes and teacher interview answers for confidentiality. The case study involved a collective study using each classroom as a case and combining them into a single study. I then asked the teachers to read and check the data for accuracy and credibility.

Stake (2006) stated, “for single-case and multi-case studies, the most common methods of case study are observation, interview, coding, data management and interpretation.” The questions provided below were asked to obtain answers to the why behind the methods,

responses, and approaches they used in their classrooms during my observations. Through interviews, I sought to answer the following research questions that guided the current study:

**RQ1:** What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children?

**RQ2:** What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations, and practices congruent with DAP?

**RQ3:** To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond with their observed practices?

### **The Pre-Interview Questions for Teachers**

1. Teacher's Name?
2. Teacher's teaching experience? How long and where and what grades?
3. What do you think transitional kindergarten is about?
4. Can you describe developmentally appropriate practice?
5. What does it mean to be 'school ready'?
6. What am I likely to see in your classroom and why? Please describe your daily activity schedule in the first 2 hours of your class day and how these activities are congruent to DAP and 'school readiness.'
7. How do you know if your students are learning?
8. What methods have you included in your classroom to show/develop students around social emotional support, classroom management and instructional support?

### **Post Interview Questions for Teachers**



1. What were the activities in your classroom that your students were engaged in, and how did these activities promote the following developmentally appropriate practices and 'school readiness?
2. Social Emotional Support
3. Classroom Management
4. Instructional Support

My observations of the TK teachers took place in the morning period of the class and were divided into three areas of (a) social emotional support, (b) classroom organization, and (c) instructional support. These three areas are attributes of a developmentally appropriate classroom that will contribute to its students' school readiness. Social emotional support and learning (SEL) in a classroom is obtained by fostering and maintaining positive relationships with adults and students, understanding and managing emotions among different student populations and settings, and making responsible decisions. In order for a young student to become a balanced, contributing citizen, they must be able to control their impulses, motivate themselves, develop a positive attitude, understand and interpret their emotions.

Research has shown that early behavior problems are the greatest predictor of long-term negative outcomes like unemployment, substance abuse, and incarceration. As a result, children's classroom experience must assist them in developing the skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision making (O'Conner et al., 2017).

Pianta et al. (2012) stated that an organized classroom includes a wide range of classroom processes related to the organization and management of its student's behaviors, time, and

attention in the classrooms. Classrooms function best and provide the most opportunities for learning when students are well behaved, consistently have things to do, and are interested and engaged in the learning tasks. Classroom organization has roots in constructivism, in which learners construct meaning through real-life experiences and interactions with each other. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children's environment influences how they think and what they are thinking about. Vygotsky also stated that children's cognitive development stems from social interactions through guided learning within the ZPD.

McLeod (2019) stated that the primary responsibility of the teacher in an organized classroom is to help students become active participants in their own learning in a collaborative problem-solving environment. Teachers are facilitators of learning, as they share knowledge and authority with the students. McLeod also compared the traditional classroom to a constructivist classroom. These comparisons are listed in Table 6.

**Table 6***Traditional Classroom Versus Constructivist Classroom*

Traditional Classroom	Constructivist Classroom
Strict adherence to a fixed curriculum is highly valued	Pursuit of student questions and interests is valued
Learning is based on repetition	Learning is interactive, building on what the student already knows.
Teacher-centered	Student- centered
Teachers disseminate information to students; students are recipients of knowledge (passive learning)	Teachers have a dialogue with students, helping students construct their own knowledge (active learning)
Teacher’s role is directive, rooted in authority	Teacher’s role is interactive, rooted in negotiation.
Students work primarily alone (competitive)	Students work primarily in groups (cooperative)

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*Note.* (McLeod, 2019)

Ari et al. (2016) concluded that constructivism requires teachers to assume new roles and responsibilities in classroom management and make the relevant activities changes in alignment to the constructivist approach. Further, instructional support, according to Pianta et al. (2012),

does not focus on the learning activities or the type of curriculum, but rather how effectively the material is used to support cognitive and language development. As a result, the focus is placed on quality of feedback, language modeling, and concept development.

Constructivist theorist Jerome Bruner based his framework for instruction on the study of cognition and that learners construct new ideas or concepts based on their past or current knowledge. Bruner (1966) looked at four aspects of the theory of instruction: (a) predisposition to learning, (b) the way the body of knowledge is structured so it is easily grasped by the learner, (c) the effective sequences in which to present the material, and (d) the nature and pacing of rewards and punishment.

Bruner focused his studies on the education of young children, specifically focusing on math and science in 1960, math and social science in 1973, language learning in 1983, and most recently, the social and cultural aspects of learning in 1986, 1990, and 1996. Bruner believed that instruction must be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the students willing and able to learn. Instruction, according to Bruner, must be structured so students can easily grasp the content-spiral organization. Instruction must be designed to facilitate extrapolation and/or to fill in the gaps, transcending beyond the information given.

A popular example from Bruner (1973) illustrated his theory in the context of mathematics and social science programs for young children. Bruner stated,

The concept of prime numbers appears to be more readily grasped when the child, through construction, discovers that certain handfuls of beans cannot be laid out in completed rows and columns. Such quantities have either to be laid out in a single file or in an incomplete row-column design in which there is always one extra or one too few to fill the pattern. These patterns, the child learns, happen to be called prime. It is easy for the child to go from this step to the recognition that a multiple table, so called, is a record sheet of quantities in completed multiple rows and columns. Here is factoring, multiplication and primes in a construction that can be visualized.

Abry (2017) observed 143 teachers' implementation of core components of the responsive classroom approach to examine relations between each component and the quality of teachers' emotional, organizational, and instructional interactions.

Teaching through interactions (TTI) is a theoretically based and empirically evidenced framework for conceptualizing and measuring teacher-student patterns of classroom interactions. This theory is embedded in human development and ecological systems and works in the ZPD, where teacher-student interactions influence students development and learning. TTI identifies effective classroom practices, high quality classroom interactions, and the provision of opportunities for children to build, understand, and apply knowledge (Hamre et al., 2013). In the current study, teachers' beliefs and practices played an important role. TTI in a classroom, according to Langeloo et al. (2019), occur when teacher-child feedback creates more space for discussion and reasoning. Further, high level teacher-child interactions are characterized by emotionally supportive expressions that stimulate concept and language development in a well-organized classroom. Through the lenses of TTI, it is easier to identify the areas of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support in a classroom.

Langeloo et al. (2019), summarizing Hamre et al. (2013) and Hamre and Pianta (2007) stated the following:

Emotional support includes the enthusiasm and emotional connection between the teacher and the children in the classroom and the teacher's sensitivity to the academic and social needs of the children. Therefore, children in these classrooms take risks in their learning, as they feel safe. Classroom organization shows how the teachers monitors the productivity and promote positive behavior of the classroom and there is very little time spent on transitions and management activities. The children are always actively engaged in efficient instructional activities with interesting materials and activities. Instruction support focuses on how teachers stimulate high-order thinking and problem solving and provides high-quality feedback and maximizes learning opportunities.

In the current study, I observed the activities the teachers engaged in that promote effective classroom interactions in these domains. My post teacher questions (see Table 7) were based on the activities I observed in their classrooms. I compared their explanations to my observations, and these conversations were digitally recorded by me and transcribed by a professional transcription company for its validity and a non-biased approach. Validity, described by Maxwell (1996), is the credibility or correctness of an explanation, conclusion, description, interpretation, and conclusion or another sort of account.

**Table 7**

*Connecting Research Questions to Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>1 What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children?</p> <p>2 What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations and practices are congruent with DAP?</p> <p>3 To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond/compare with the teachers’ observed practices?</p>	<p>The Pre-Interview questions for Teachers:</p> <p>1. Teacher’s teaching experience? How long and where and what grades?</p> <p>2. What do you think Transitional kindergarten is about?</p> <p>3. Can you describe Developmentally Appropriate Practice?</p> <p>4. What does it mean to be ‘school ready’?</p>

Research Questions	Interview Questions
	<p>5. What am I likely to see in your classroom and why? Please describe your daily activity schedule in the first two hours of your class day and how these activities congruent to DAP and ‘school readiness’?</p> <p>6. How do you know if your students are learning?</p> <p>7. What methods have you included in your classroom to show/develop students around Social Emotional Support, Classroom Management and Instructional Support</p>
	<p>Post Interview Questions for Teachers</p> <p>1. Which were the activities in your classroom that your students were engaged in and how did these activities promote the following Developmentally</p>

Research Questions	Interview Questions
	<p data-bbox="1003 279 1338 384">Appropriate Practices and 'School Readiness?</p> <ol data-bbox="906 426 1338 611" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="906 426 1338 464">1. Social Emotional Support</li> <li data-bbox="906 499 1338 537">2. Classroom Management</li> <li data-bbox="906 573 1338 611">3. Instructional Support</li> </ol>

### Data Collection Procedures

Before I conducted the interviews and data collection, I submitted my IRB application on February 4, 2021, and I received approval from my university IRB department on April 30, 2021. I sent emails to leadership of both school districts explaining the purpose of the study, providing a request to interview TK teachers in February 2021, as I needed them to sign my consent documents to conduct research at the districts. I received approval on April 22, 2021 and uploaded to IRB.

Upon receipt of my IRB approval letter, I sent a copy to the districts, and the participants were emailed and invited to a phone call during which I explained the study, answered any questions, and set dates for the interviews and observations. There are 14 TK teachers employed at the district, and four teachers out of the 14 TK teachers responded to my request from District # 1. From District #2, two teachers out of the three TK teachers employed responded as interested in being a part of my study. All interviews and observations were recorded and secured on a password-protected cloud-based server to ensure anonymity and privacy of all participants. All the interviews and observations were conducted in May 2021 via Zoom, as



districts were still under COVID-19 restrictions that only allowed district staff and students to be on campus.

I conducted a pre-interview, a post interview, and a classroom observation for each of the six TK teachers, and thus gathered 18 recordings. The 18 recordings were transcribed by the transcription company Rev.com, and pseudonyms were provided to the six participants to protect their identities. The participant interviews and observation transcripts were shared with each participant as a fact check process/respondent validation and strategy for ensuring internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The transcripts were then coded to generate themes and patterns from the data, which connected to my research questions.

I conducted all the observations via Zoom, as both districts had COVID-19 restriction protocols and social distancing in place. I turned off my camera and audio so that I would not be a distraction to the group dynamics. Four of the observations took place with the teacher and students during a virtual classroom, and the other two observations were virtual, although the students were physically in the classroom. These virtual spaces were very different from the normal classroom observation and created various dynamics. The students in the virtual classes were observable only in small picture boxes on the screen, sitting in one place for the class time, which was shortened to avoid screen fatigue. As a result, the element of an active and engaged classroom of young learners was missing. According to Lobe et al. (2020), in a time of unprecedented change and disruption due to COVID-19, qualitative researchers face unique opportunities and challenges. There is a need for researchers to explore the lived experiences of individuals facing these challenging times. Many researchers working on unrelated pandemic studies are forced to transition from face-to-face data collection to some form of internet-based collection. Thus, using the Zoom platform for the interviews and observations was the closest

that I could get to face-to-face data collection. Table 8 shows the data collection timeline for the study, including when I received IRB approval and when I commenced data collection.

**Table 8**

*Data Collection Timeline*

DOCUMENT TYPE	DATE
IRB SUBMISSION	FEBRUARY 4, 2021
IRB APPROVAL	APRIL 30, 2021
DATA COLLECTION	MAY, 2021

**Positionality**

This new phenomenon of TK has interested me since its inception, especially the idea of adding a whole new grade to the public school system in California and creating an opportunity for all young children to receive an early education. As the principal researcher in this study, I felt like an ‘insider’ in the world of early education, as I have worked in the field since 1995. Wiederhold (2015) described an ‘insider’ as one ‘at home’ who identifies with the group they are researching. For example, a blind person studying the experiences of the visually impaired is ‘an insider’ due to the shared experiences of the visual impaired.

I believe that, as an ‘insider’ researcher, my interviewees/participants were comfortable sharing their beliefs and experiences with me, as I understand their role of an early educator. I also work at one of the districts, which gave me an insider edge, although I have no direct influence over those teachers as I am seen as an ally. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out,

“considering issues such as positionality and insider/outsider stances within a research study is critical.”

As an early educator leader and former teacher, I take a global look at the field and programs while the participants’ experience in the classrooms is filtered through the beliefs and explanations of their practices with their students. My participants are immersed daily in interpreting the guidelines and curricular of this uncharted new grade dubbed TK.

### **Validity**

The biggest challenge of this study was that all the interviews and observations were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 restrictions. To help combat my participants’ anxiety before the interviews and observations, I shared the interview questions with them beforehand and conducted phone meetings to answer their questions and concerns. I also did not turn on my camera during the classroom observations so the students would not be distracted by my presence. A sympathetic and interested listener helps participants enjoy sharing their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I had the participants member check the data transcripts for clarification. I thoroughly compared the 18 transcripts and developed codes and themes. I also developed chronological information about the six participants’ educational and employment background.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a summary of the data collection process as well as the findings of the perceptions of six TK teachers study participants derived from interviews and observations. TK is the newest addition to California's educational system and is a very controversial and highly discussed topic. This study focused on the elements of TK that are involved in DAP. This case study observed under the hood of teacher-child classroom interactions in TK classrooms in two school districts in northern California. Six TK teachers responded to the invitation from the two districts, and, with each, I conducted a pre-interview, an observation in their classroom setting, and a post interview to explore the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children?

**RQ2:** What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations, and practices are congruent with DAP?

**RQ3:** To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond/compare with the teachers' observed practices?

The circumstances surrounding the interviews and observations were unique, as each interview and observation was conducted online through Zoom. The 2021 school year took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, and all classes were conducted virtually through Zoom and Google classrooms in both districts. Only staff and students had authority to be on school campuses physically when they did return for one month of school. The teachers in their interviews mentioned the uniqueness and difficulty of virtual classrooms and how they affected their teaching.

Teacher #4, who conducted one of the two classes in which students were physically in the classroom, stated,

*It was extremely different from how I would normally teach school. I work really hard to make my Zoom classes engaging, but even the best day on Zoom is not as good as the worst day in the classroom. On a side note, it's funny because, a lot of kids, when I would sing and dance on Zoom would just kinda watch me like this-you know, like they were watching television.*

When comparing her Zoom class to her current class of students that returned in the last few weeks after months of Zoom virtual classes, she pointed out that during her music and movement time,

*I turned on music, and I didn't even say stand up, I mean, they just were out of their seats and dancing moving, and I didn't say come on you guys, stand up, and on Zoom, I'm practically pulling teeth and I'm moving like a wild woman.*

Teacher # 5 also stated,

*Sometimes my students would like to tell jokes to each other or just wanna talk to their teacher and that's hard on Zoom, you-you don't get those little interactions with them that we would have in person, so I usually leave time at the end for whoever wants to stick around and tell a few jokes, or you know, share something with their teacher that they are excited about.*

Teacher #4's current class aligned more to a developmentally appropriate classroom than her Zoom class, as the students had the freedom to physically engage in the music activities. In her Virtual Zoom class, the students had to be encouraged and coaxed to engage in the activity, and

many of them choose not to participate. She did most of the movement to encourage them, as she stated that she had to keep moving like a wild woman.

In this chapter, I present the key findings from the transcripts obtained from the participants who accepted my invitation to join the study. The following are some unexpected characteristics they share with each other:

1. They have taught TK for more than 2 years.
2. They have taught other grades
3. They had other early education teaching experience.
4. They taught students virtually this school year.

The recorded audio interviews were emailed to Rev.com for transcription, and the qualitative data from the 18 separate transcripts were analyzed using an inductive coding approach to explore the lived experiences of the TK teachers, allowing themes to emerge and develop. Inductive coding also supported me and my case study design in answering the *how* and *why* questions.

## **Participants**

Six participants accepted my invitation and interviewed for this study from two school districts (i.e., District #1 and District #2) in the same county in northern California. In District #1, there were three female and one male teacher (i.e., Teacher #1, Teacher #2, Teacher #3, and Teacher #6). In District # 2, there were two female teachers (i.e., Teacher #4 and Teacher #5).

### ***District # 1 Teachers***

Teacher #1 was a substitute teacher for 10 years, worked in long-term positions in preschool to fifth grade, and has been a full-time teacher for the past 6 years. This is her fifth year teaching TK. She also taught preschool in the summer for four summers at a community

college. Teacher #2 has been teaching since 1998 and taught fifth and sixth grade for 2 years each. He left teaching for a while and worked as a nanny and a stay-at-home dad. He started taking early education classes and taught at a Head Start readiness program for 2 years and is in his third year of teaching transitional kindergarten.

Teacher #3 has taught for 19 years in kindergarten and first grade and for 2 years as a strategy coach in first grade. She took a year off for maternity leave and taught TK for 4 years.

Teacher # 6 received her credential in 1998 and taught fourth, fifth and sixth grades. She is a Fulbright Scholar teacher and taught overseas in Scotland for 1 year. She has taught kindergarten for 14 years and TK the past two-and-a-half years.

### ***District # 2 Teachers***

Teacher # 4 taught in various grades for the past 38 years in Colorado, Kansas, Chicago, and California. She has spent half of her career in different grades in special education and the other half in kindergarten and first grade. She was also the first TK teacher in District # 2.

Teacher # 5 worked in a private school for 4 years substituting for preschool to junior high, and worked as a reading interventionist for over 2 years. She worked as a yard duty performing before and after school care, and completed student teaching in the first and fourth grade settings. She has been a TK teacher for the past 5 years.

## **Summary of the Results**

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked: What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children? The six pre-observation interviews resulted in the following major themes developed from the codes for this question: (a) academic support/routines-school readiness, (b)

social emotional support and development-mindfulness/cognitive development, and (c) promoting discovery and fostering positive environments.

### ***Major Theme 1: Academic Support/Routines***

All six teachers believed that, as TK teachers, their role was to prepare their students (school readiness) for the next level of school (i.e., kindergarten). They also described TK as a middle ground between preschool and kindergarten, bridging the gap. Their students engaged in hands-on, manipulative activities and they would bring in the elements of learning through play from preschool and add some academic rigor, but not as rigorous as kindergarten. Teacher #5 noted:

*I know the reason why TK was formed is because they were noticing that the little kiddos who were entering kindergarten on the younger end of the spectrum, uh, were struggling, and I think its because when you look at brain development in children, um, which I majored in, uh, human development, not in liberal arts or studies, um, so that's something I learned a lot about and especially being in TK, you have to know about all the early childhood educations. So, knowing what I know and, you know, all that is that kids on the younger end of the spectrum are not always developmentally ready for the things that we expect for them in kindergarten.*

All the teachers commented that routines were important in school readiness preparation. Each teacher commonly used daily classroom routines such as the good morning songs, attendance, weather, calendars and letter of the week, music and movement, and other rote activities.

Teacher #3 use skill transfer and stated,

*I taught them to count, then when playing with bears, can they count the bears? Maybe it's not a formal test or written test, but it's me analyzing that they can apply their technique I've taught them or the information I've taught them, that they can use it.*

Teacher #4 stated,

*I prepare students in TK, learning proper pencil grip and um, learning helps them to listen to an adult other than mom and dad, listening, starting to be aware of others in their surroundings and moving beyond that egocentric, self-centered way. I think all of those things are part of being school ready.*



Teacher # 1 said,

*I think a lot of what I do at TK is building that stamina for school readiness, so that they have the physical means and the mental focus. And I think school readiness also includes that social-emotional development, I think, um, learning how to express your emotions. Being school-ready is physical, emotional, and academic. Those are the three things that are getting them ready.*

She continued, stating, “they know how to be a sister or brother, a member of a family but it’s now learning the rules of a student and how to be a member of a school community.” Teacher #6 encourages free exploration, cooperative and role-play with lots of choices in various different centers.

### ***Major Theme 2: Social Emotional Support***

Social emotional support was important to all six teachers, and they described their practices in helping the students’ emotional development. They referred to social emotional support in various terms of importance to development. They used the word ‘feelings’ on numerous occasions, reading social stories, practicing respect and kindness, checking in on each other, taking deep breathes for relaxation, and leaving time for interaction. It was mentioned that teachers in District #1 have access to and use Inner Explorer, a mindfulness program which helps with social emotional development. Teacher #3 stated,

*We do a lot of talk about, um, social and emotional feelings, feelings that you teach them how to describe your feelings, what do feelings look like? Um, how do we look at other people and figure out their feelings? Um, anger management, where we’re really big on, um, I’m forgetting the word...not yoga, oh dam it, what is it called? Mindfulness. Mindfulness. So there is a big push for kids to know how to, uh, regulate their own bodies and their own feelings, and know how to calm themselves and that sort of thing.*

### ***Major Theme 3: Fostering Positive Environments***

According to Wilson-Fleming and Wilson-Younger (2012), “a positive classroom environment is an important tool for establishing a successful and effective school year.” There

are numerous factors that may have an influence on positive classroom environments. It is critical, however, that teachers create a positive classroom environment to encourage the students' growth. A positive classroom environment enhances the students' ability to learn and to be productive in and out of the classroom.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the change from the physical classroom environment to a virtual classroom environment for the students and their teachers has been challenging. The majority of these TK students have not been on the elementary school campus, have not been in class, and have not met their teacher or classmates in person. Although students returned for the last month of the school year, many families opted to keep their children in the virtual classrooms. As a result, teachers conducted in-person and virtual classes for their students. All the teachers commented that this year in particular was very challenging in creating and fostering positive environments in a virtual classroom. Teacher #1 stated that students typically raise their hands to speak during an activity, which is important for classroom management, but online this is tricky. They have to learn to use the raise hand and other reaction buttons to respond.

Teacher #2 pointed out that she appreciated that she did not have to wear her mask with the online class so they were able to see the movements of her mouth when she pronounced certain words, but assessments like kicking and catching a ball were challenging while they were looking at their screens. Teacher #3 pointed out that playing for 20 minutes on Fridays at their tables could not happen in a virtual classroom. Teacher #5 keeps a positive virtual class environment and community by starting with a welcome song, a chance for all the kids to say hello to one another, the Pledge of Allegiance, and information on the class activities. She gets

them moving around and allows them to take breaks and joke and chat with each other and the teacher.

Teacher #5 also pointed out that the back and forth dialogue on Zoom was challenging, and just to unmute their computers takes up precious time. Teacher #4 compared virtual classroom to television watching, as some students zoned out and were not used to interacting with a screen. She would be dancing and moving like a wild woman, and inviting them to participate was like pulling teeth. Teacher #4 commented that “we are asking something of kids that is even difficult for adults to know how to interact where you sit watching a screen, that’s what we do when we don’t wanna think.”

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations and practices are congruent with DAP? The NAEYC (2020) defined DAP as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful and engaged learning.” Educators implement developmentally appropriate practice by recognizing the multiple assets all young children bring to the early learning program as unique individuals and as members of families and communities. Building on each child’s strengths—and taking care to not harm any aspect of each child’s physical, cognitive, social, or emotional wellbeing—educators design and implement learning environments to help all children achieve their full potential across all domains of development and across all content areas. DAP recognizes and supports each individual as a valued member of the learning community. As a result, to be developmentally appropriate, practices must also be culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate for each child.

TK teachers have a unique opportunity: they plan and implement a curriculum reflective of a developmental continuum. This continuum reinforces and builds upon preschool learning expectations to prepare students to meet or exceed rigorous standards at the completion of their second year of kindergarten. Senate Bill 1381 requires district to provide a “modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate” (Education Code Section 48000; Governor’s State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care, 2013). The expectation of the State of California was for TK teaches to use DAP. The TK teachers from District #1 and #2 collectively discussed using DAP and described DAP in their classrooms. Their descriptions may not align cleanly with the NAEYC definition, but they mentioned many of the elements that are included.

From District #1, Teacher #1 described DAP:

*So, when you’re taking about developmentally appropriate practice, it means that your expectations for your students are appropriate for not only their age, but where they are as an individual, so each individual child is going to where, um, like, changes depending on where they’re at. Giving the children what they need in the way that they need it and helping them grow and learn.*

Teacher #5 from District #2 stated,

*From a teacher’s perspective it would mean planning and, uh, performing lessons and activities that are appropriate for a child’s level of development, um, cognitively, socially, emotionally, um, and making sure that whatever teaching, whatever scaffolds, whatever, um, assessments that I’m doing correspond with the developmental level of the student that I’m working with.*

Teacher #4, also from District #2, compared DAP to meet the children’s needs like in special education. Moreover, I found that the TK teachers should increase their knowledge base and understanding of DAP to ensure their classroom practices are truly aligned with principles of DAP. The broad strokes approach to DAP does not guarantee its detailed implementation in the classroom and thus may not achieve its objectives. If the objectives of DAP are not met in the

classroom then students will not benefit from its solid foundation that sets the tone for their future success.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question, asked: To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond/compare with the teachers' observed practices? I conducted observations of the six teachers virtually on Zoom with my camera turned off to avoid any distractions to the students. It was remarkably interesting to see family members, parents, and siblings involved in the learning process by assisting the children with online support and informally chatting with the teachers. During each of the six observations, students experienced connectivity issues and needed support with their computer skills. For example, a student in Teacher #5's classroom did not have his camera turned on, so the teacher had to ask him a couple of times to turn it on. Another student kept muting himself while talking. The background noise from a student's television in Teacher #3's classroom was loud and distracting, so she asked them to press the mute button. In addition, Teacher #4 stated that all her students except for two were dropped off their computers by the internet the prior day, so she had to reintroduce the information to the class.

All six teachers welcomed, chatted, sang, danced, and engaged informally with their students at the beginning of each of their observations to create a positive virtual environment. One of the students in Teacher #1's classroom was in another state, and the teacher explained to the other students that she flew in an airplane across the ocean, and she was on an island. The teachers used various strategies to help the students focus on the day's activities, as students were easily distracted from either their household activities or another student on Zoom. Teacher

#1 used stretching and deep breathing techniques, and Teacher #5 had the students recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Keeping the students on task and focused seemed to be a challenge with virtual learning, like taking turns to speak. The teachers strove to keep their classroom routines by reminding the students about the classroom protocols and rules and the activities for the day. Although students were asked to wait and take turns by the teachers, they were not prevented from speaking and sharing. The teachers reminded the students to use the hand raising button to answer questions. In Teacher #3's classroom, a student came online eating during class: "Oh, okay. Where-what is that cup in the camera? Move you cup. What's that? Cereal? Move it so it's not on the computer."

According to Governor's State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care (2013), California has a diverse population of young learners from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers of TK students recognize the value of diversity and show respect for each child's home culture and language by incorporating familiar words, objects, and images into program and curricular design. At the same time, they continually encourage the development of English language and literacy skills. Creating family and community partnerships for children who are learning English is also an important goal for educators. Teachers make use of dynamic instructional strategies that engage different modalities to bridge linguistic backgrounds. Teacher #3 in District #2 is bilingual, and thus spoke in both Spanish and English to her Spanish-speaking students. They both informally discussed some current events happening at the student's home. In another class, an older sibling came into the Zoom class to assist with translation for the TK student.

The teachers also conducted a number of routine activities with their students with an emphasis on literacy and math. The students also receive weekly packets with materials needed to complete the activities for the week like counting materials, bears, whiteboard, paper, playdough, colored pencils, and storybooks. There were a number of work sheets and routine activities used, which may be not congruent with DAP. The teachers modeled the worksheet or activity online, and the students followed.

There were many opportunities for cross conversations that helped foster student participation and motivated them to learn. The teachers were very skillful in setting boundaries and discipline. During an activity, Teacher #4 reminded a student, “but right now it’s her turn to share, thank you though” and “I see your hand up, but right now we’re clapping.” In all the classrooms, teachers redirected students during their activity time.

The teachers answered the following question in their post interview: Which were the activities in your classroom that your students were engaged in and how did these activities promote the following developmentally appropriate practices and ‘school readiness? All six teachers believed that they supported their students socially and emotionally by welcoming them, providing a check-in time (Teacher #1), and saying goodbye and giving them opportunities for informal conversations. Teacher #2 stated,

*But they do...they do know, because I tell them that school is their work and we do have playtime, and we do have time to move around and I think you saw that, so I don’t...um, force them, to do anything. I invite them and I try not to raise my voice unless it is that somebody who is going to hurt somebody irrevocably. But that rarely ever happens (laughs).*

Teacher #3 pointed out that the students’ extended family members also pop on the classroom Zoom to say hello and informally chat.

All the teachers agreed that classroom management on Zoom had its challenges. Teacher #4, for example, stated her students staggered in at various times, with some clicking in early, some right on time, and others clicking in late. According to Teacher #4,

*In a normal classroom I can get next to a student who is misbehaving by just proxemics can change a behavior, while online if they are running around the room or crawling under the table. I can keep calling their name saying I can't see you, you know it's a little distracting and sometimes difficult. Occasionally I have talked to students after class about their behavior*

Teacher #3 stated, "I think everybody's having a challenging time obviously online, is that they have been put in TK and that's the biggest thing they're missing, being online." Regarding classroom management, Teacher #5 also stated,

*I can't have individual conversations with the kids virtually, for instance I can't pull up to ... side and say you know other students would like to say things and you're kind of hogging the time. I can't have that conversation with her without being in the front of the class, which is difficult, and it makes it harder.*

Instructional support was another grey area in the observations, as some students were not participating. When asked how the students could be assessed to know if they were learning, Teacher #3 was transparent when she said, "I'm sorry, I'm not putting a grade in these areas because I don't know." All the teachers commented that they believe they are creating strong literacy and math opportunities for their students, but the virtual classroom prohibited much of the learning. They were extremely pleased to have some of the students return to the classroom, even though it was for 1 month

For example, Teacher #5 said, "I think another difference is that is that there's more accountability. I can walk around, I can look at their work that they're doing, I can see their pencil grip." Teacher #3 stated,

*One of the things that I knew I couldn't do when they were online was to cut and glue. So, I really pushed it in their independent homework packets and I sent brochures on how to teach them to cut, how you know, how to hold it in their finger, all that little stuff and I*



*had a kid who came and said, 'My mom and dad do not let me use scissors,' So for those last six months, they didn't do any of the cutting that I had given.*

Another challenge was for the students who were English language learners, as Teacher #2 pointed out that all young children are English language learners. Families in this classroom would receive information along with books from the library in both Spanish and English. Teacher #2 showed videos in Spanish, like Sesame Street, and put the English words up. Teacher #3 speaks Spanish and was able to informally communicate with her ELL students about some family events, which allowed them to feel included in the classroom.

Overall, the six teachers believed that their practices and activities were congruent with DAP. In Chapter 5, I discuss the results of the study. I also connect the findings of the study to the relevant literature presented in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This study examined the classroom practices and the beliefs of teachers in these newly developed TK in two school districts. The study sought both commonalities and differences across manifestations found in these classroom settings. Each of these TK teachers were considered a case study that is unique and studied to gain an understanding of their practices and explanations in their classrooms. The researcher assumed that the complex meanings of TK are understood differently and better because of the practices and contexts of each TK teacher case. Although the cases may be similar in many areas and respects, there was evidence of unusual features and differences to show how uniformity or disparity characterizes TK.

Early education opportunities have been the center of many conversations and speeches, including President Obama's remarks that "Early education is one of the best investments we can make not just in a child's future, but in our country. It's one of the best investments we can make" at the 2014 Early Education Summit State (White House, 2014). President Biden announced in April 2021, "the American Families Plan will make transformational investments from early childhood to postsecondary education so all children will grow, learn and gain the skills they need to succeed. High quality Universal preschool for all three and four-year-old" (WH.GOV, 2021).

The study focused on TK teachers from two districts in their classroom settings, and I undertook classroom observations and teacher interviews to explore the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children?

**RQ2:** What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations and practices are congruent with DAP?

**RQ3:** To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond/compare with the teachers' observed practices?

The six TK teachers in the two districts from the same county in northern California had three opportunities to explain their beliefs and practices regarding what is developmentally appropriate as well as the knowledge of TK overall. They each underwent a pre observation interview, an observation of their classroom practice, and a post observation interview. All of these took place remotely through Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic school rules and each districts' virtual learning mandates.

### **Summary of the Results**

In reporting the results of the study, three complementary lines of inquiry with respect to DAP centered on the six TK teacher's perception: (a) social emotional support, (b) classroom management, and (c) instructional support. In this section, I examine the themes and lines of inquiry in the context of each research question. The study's findings are important to school districts that wish to make changes to promote more universal DAP by exploring the TK teachers' perception and the actual practices in the classrooms. This study was conducted in a vastly different and difficult period in education, as the entire country had to pivot from in-person classes to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. TK is usually the first opportunity for students to experience the school system, and these students had their first experience remotely.

## Discussion of the Results

Regarding the question, What are the explanations and beliefs that Transitional Kindergarten teachers hold about the practices in which they engage during the morning period with young children?, all six TK teachers shared the same beliefs that the practices they engage in are centered on social emotional and instructional support and classroom management. Each participant mentioned how important social emotional support was for their young students. Further, they mentioned that TK bridged the gap in more social interactions and focused less on academics. TK allowed participants to focus more on play-based activities, helping students to navigate friendships, and preparing students to be school ready. Teachers also taught their students to take responsibility for their things and clean up. There was less pressure on the students in TK, and getting them ready for kindergarten presents a lot more pressure.

Teachers also compared their normal classroom practices to this online/distance learning period and the various ways they infused social emotional interactions into their online classrooms. Teachers referred to the check-ins when the students first enter the virtual class in the mornings, giving them extra time to talk and listen to other students. The teachers allowed the students to tell jokes and share stories about their families and kept the Zoom times short and broke the class into smaller group times. The teachers also practiced maintaining a positive environment and building relationships, welcoming students, saying goodbyes, and using stretching, breathing exercises, dancing, and storytelling to have fun.

Classroom management was also interesting, as the teachers pointed out that it was difficult to maintain during online learning. One teacher pointed out the Zoom experience for the students is like watching television, as they were not used to interacting with a screen. The teachers would normally move around the classroom to assist students who were struggling, but

during the online class they could not. They would be able to speak to individual students quietly by themselves but online the teachers run the risk of embarrassing a student in front of the entire class. The teachers were also challenged with teaching students quasi-classroom rules online etiquette and protocols. For example, students were asked to use the raise hand button to take turns and speak instead of blurting out the answers, use the mute buttons and video buttons, come to online class fully dressed, and refrain from eating or drinking while using the computer. Under normal circumstances, eating took place at designated times.

When asked about instructional support, the teachers spoke about meeting the individual students' needs, as each child is different and building their skills. The teachers made comparisons between a normal school day and the online school experience. One teacher talked about how to be school-ready is to be academically ready, and the students in TK needed to build their muscle stamina and mental focus. The teachers stated they did not expect mastery from the students, but they introduced them to English language arts, academic vocabulary, looking at books, reading texts, and answering critical thinking questions. The students are given workbooks to practice letter and sentence writing and repetitive practice of pointing to words and reading them. The students also receive a packet to practice their fine motor skills during their asynchronous time.

Regarding the question: What is the degree to which these beliefs, explanations and practices are congruent with DAP?, NAEYC (2020) stated,

Chief among the professional responsibilities of early childhood educators is the responsibility to plan and implement intentional, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that promote the social and emotional development, physical development and health, cognitive development, and general learning competencies of each child served.

All the TK teachers in both the pre and post interviews stated that they understand their students need lessons that help develop their social emotional, physical, and cognitive development; thus, they intentionally plan and implement such lessons. The teachers believed and pointed out that social emotional development was most important for their students, and the two school districts invested in social emotional curriculum for the TK programs. They believed they met the DAP needs of their students by having the routine of welcoming them, saying goodbye, and creating a positive and fun environment. They believe that, although the classes were held online, they gave them time to chat with each other and the teachers in order to build relationships as well as a sense of belonging. They sought to engage them through mindfulness, stretching and breathing exercises, movement/dance, music and singing and reading.

The teachers also talked about the students becoming school-ready through literacy, math, and science lessons. Although the teachers did not repeat the verbatim explanation of NAEYC's definition, each mentioned parts of the definition in their answers.

Regarding the third question: To what degree do their beliefs and explanations correspond/compare with the teachers' observed practices? Observations of the six teachers were held online through Zoom in the morning and at the beginning of their whole group class with my video and sound muted so the students could not hear or see me to avoid distraction. Every class began with a welcome routine from the teachers, and students had an opportunity to informally chat with each other and the teacher. In some instances, family members were also present to assist the students with trouble shooting their devices and informally chatting with the teachers. The teachers provided technology assistance, guided reading sessions, reading walks, songs, movements, and English arts and math. During much of the literacy lessons, the teachers modeled the work, including cutting and handwriting exercises. Much of the focus of the lessons

was building literacy through reading and writing and routine math counting skills, which pointed to a 'school readiness' preparation.

All the teachers spoke in a calm and positive tone of voice even when they had to correct or discipline a student. There were a number of distractions during the lessons where the teacher had to stop and remind students to use the 'raise hand' button to speak or mute their microphones or turn on their cameras. There were other instances where family members were called on to assist the student and trouble shoot their devices.

*In 2020, NAEYC published its fourth edition of its position statement on DAP, stating, Every child, birth through age 8, has the right to equitable learning opportunities-in centers, family child care homes, or schools-that fully support their optimal development and learning across all domains and content areas. Children are born eager to learn; they take delight exploring their world and making connections. The degree to which early learning programs support children's delight and wonder in learning reflects the setting's quality. The Educators who choose to engage in developmentally appropriate practices foster young children's joyful learning and maximize each child's opportunity to achieve their full potential.*

According to Charlesworth (1998), a quality pre-kindergarten utilizes DAP, which emphasizes the whole child (i.e., physical, social, emotional, and cognitive), while taking into account gender, culture, disabilities, socioeconomic status, family factors and any other important elements in order to meet the individual child's needs, developmental level, and learning style.

As I reflect and consider what a developmentally appropriate classroom is and should look like based on that definition, I did not notice these classrooms fulfilling these ideals. The teachers believed the tenets of a developmentally appropriate classroom and sought to create and foster a positive environment for their students. The unique circumstances surrounding this particular school year, however, limited their execution of a DAP.

Mincemoyer (2016) stated that an early childhood educator's major responsibility when teaching is to offer both child-initiated and teacher-directed learning experiences. I did observe

more teacher-directed learning than student initiated learning, which is a result of the virtual environment. The teachers sent a packet home for the students with materials and activities based on the lessons taught that week. Therefore, there was no choice on the part of the students or initiated learning. The students did not have access to the classroom with different and varying materials to enhance their imagination or fine and large motor activities. There were few opportunities for the students to make meaningful choices and play. Play is considered children's work and provides the teachers with opportunities to observe their understanding and skills.

Teacher #2 and Teacher #4 taught classes in which the students were physically present and thus had an advantage over the other four teachers. Their classrooms were active and busy, and the students had access to the materials and equipment that allowed them to have free play. The students in Teacher #4's class initiated the music and movement activity, and she did not have to coax them into participating. Similarly, the students in Teacher #2's classroom actively participated in the morning routine without prompting. Although the physical classroom time period was shortened, the students in these two classes were allowed to go outside and access the playground area during the breaks, while the virtual students did not have that opportunity.

In a DAP classroom, educators consider each of their student's characteristics in choosing appropriate learning formats. These educators offer flexibility of participation to accommodate students' individual needs and organize the schedules to suit. Unfortunately, the virtual classroom did not offer flexibility or time to allow for these learning formats. The students' virtual classrooms were divided into synchronous and asynchronous times. Their synchronous time was whole group, and students who struggled and needed extra support got together in a small group for tutoring. The students also received weekly packets to complete



during their asynchronous time. As a result, the virtual classroom was rigid and did not offer the flexibility needed in a DAP.

All six teachers felt strongly about the social emotional aspect of their student learning. They each wanted to create a caring community of learners and build relationships with them and they sought to maintain a positive environment. In each classroom observation, the teachers were friendly with the students and engaged informally with them and members of their families. The teachers laughed, sang, and included the students' cultures and languages into the virtual classroom space. Both districts used a social emotional curriculum. Although some students were excited to chat with the teachers and other students, there were others who simply stared blankly at the screen. As Teacher #4 stated,

*I think we're asking something of kids that, is even difficult for adults to know how to interact where you sit just watching a screen, that's what we do when we don't 'wanna' think anymore. You know, for me, Friday night I look forward to, you know, watching a movie and eating popcorn and not talking all a lot, so, you know, I think kids are sort of trained that way.*

An observation that I had was the students in the virtual classrooms' ability to self-regulate effectively, as they had not been in the physical space with their teachers and peers. These students did not receive the benefit of working in groups for collaborative learning through peer interactions and understanding spoken and unspoken social cues. These opportunities allow students to navigate relationships and to build conflict resolution skills and work with others outside of their home communities. Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child's development and learning, and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur. When this group of 2020-21 TK students return to the physical classroom, I believe that they may experience difficulty navigating social issues, and teachers may need to support with heavy social emotional focused classrooms.

## Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Langeloo et al. (2019) summarizing Hamre et al. (2013) and Hamre and Pianta (2007) stated,

*Emotional support includes the enthusiasm and emotional connection between the teacher and the children in the classroom and the teacher's sensitivity to the academic and social needs of the children. Therefore, children in these classrooms take risks in their learning, as they feel safe. Classroom organization shows how the teachers monitors the productivity and promote positive behavior of the classroom and there is very little time spent on transitions and management activities. The children are always actively engaged in efficient instructional activities with interesting materials and activities. Instruction support focuses on how teachers stimulate high-order thinking and problem solving and provides high-quality feedback and maximizes learning opportunities.*

The six teachers in this study believed that their TK students need emotional support, and they attempted to provide this support in the classroom. During the classroom observations, I did notice the teachers having informal conversations with the students, and the students were also sharing back and forth looks with each other. The instructional activities were based on literacy and math and were teacher-initiated and led, and this was due to the limited online time the teachers spend with their students. The students also receive packets to work on with their families. As a result, the instructional support to stimulate higher-order thinking and problem solving and high quality feedback was minimal. It is unfortunate that these TK students' first school experience was disrupted by the pandemic. They did not, therefore, receive the full benefits of a DAP classroom that all the TK teachers believed in and strive to offer their students.

### Limitations

There are limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, the study was conducted during COVID-10, the worst pandemic in modern world history. Thus, all educational facilities and classes were closed for in-person classes and all were conducted online. This created a different type of teaching and learning experience for teachers and students. A

normal 3 to 5-hour school day for the TK student was reduced to a 15 to 20-minute class conducted online, including a possible small group activity and take home packet. The teachers experienced challenges in creating robust creative early education classes without the tenets of hands-on activities to fuel the student's creativity.

Aside from conducting ethnographic research in a classroom over an entire school term or year, it is important to note that a sampling of observations cannot fully capture the totality of one's teaching practice –even without a pandemic to further interfere with teachers optimal work being demonstrated. This is a rare window view not a comprehensive view or a formal evaluation of a teachers' practices. Having future research studies conducted in live classrooms may yield different results.

### **Implication of the Results for Practice**

Two phenomenal events in California's education arena have taken center stage and changed the educational landscape forever: TK and the COVID-19 pandemic. When I began the study, neither were as familiar to the public as they are today. TK was a gift of a year of quality developmentally appropriate early education primarily for students whose 5<sup>th</sup> birthday was between September 2<sup>nd</sup> and December 1<sup>st</sup> of the school year. Then, in 2021, Governor Gavin Newsome signed Assembly Bill 130 (AB130), expanding the current TK and providing every 4 year old in California an opportunity to attend and receive a free developmentally appropriate early education experience before kindergarten by the 2025-26 school year, changing the K-12 education system to PK-12. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of education when all schools closed and students, including the very young, had to receive their learning through an online format.

One of the mandates of the AB 130 is that the TK classrooms must be developmentally appropriate in nature. The authors of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), the NAEYC, in its revised position statement, included 12 researched-based guiding principles to facilitate decisions in early education:

1. All the domains of development and learning (i.e., physical, social, emotional, and cognitive) are important, and are closely interrelated. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.
2. Many aspects of children's learning and development follow well-documented sequences, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.
3. Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child's individual functioning.
4. Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience.
5. Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child's development and learning and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur.
6. Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacity.

7. Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.
8. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
9. Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a variety of ways; a wide range of teaching strategies and interactions are effective to supporting all these kinds of learning.
10. Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition, and social competence.
11. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery and also when there are many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.
12. Children's experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning, such as persistence, initiative, and flexibility. In turn, these dispositions and behaviors affect their learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). These tenets are necessary in order for a classroom to be deemed as developmentally appropriate.

The TK classroom must be vibrant with opportunities for its young learners to play, explore, imaginative, tactile, develop social relationships with peers, learn to self-regulate and develop empathy for others. TK classrooms are joyous spaces with smaller ratios of students and teachers who support and offer individualized and culturally competent care and education. The

COVID-19 pandemic caused TK classrooms, with all the developmentally appropriate opportunities, to go from a physical space to an online format. The TK classroom lost many of the DAP opportunities and, in my study, I had the ability to observe these losses.

The education system is under the constant threat of the COVID-19 and its varying mutations and, as a result, administrators and teachers of TK classrooms must prepare for any change that could take place. Although schools acted quickly to make the switch to online learning, they were not prepared to offer a true developmentally appropriate opportunity, and TK is the first early education for many students. Administrators along with teachers need to plan a comprehensive curriculum plan to cover the whole child. The plans need to include adverse trauma informed practices, focused social emotional learning, students with disabilities, and those speaking another or second language. Instead of worksheets, their teachers that are family friendly and initiate inquiry and investigations would be able to provide TK students with take home, family STEM materials.

Another focus should be on families, as the pandemic due to loss of employment and a host of other issues negatively impacted many families. This loss of wages led to issues of isolation, food, and housing insecurities. Low-income families especially depended on schools for daily meals and the social and health well-being of their children. They also became their educational instructors and many were unprepared for technology. Therefore, schools need to partner and intentionally engage with families, especially those traditionally marginalized. Schools should also facilitate linkages with community partners with services that can support them. School leadership can survey families to receive feedback on their needs as well as offer them learning opportunities in the event of more closures.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

I believe that further research is warranted in the area of DAP in TK, and a longitudinal study following the TK students in 2020-21 school year until Grade 3 creating PK-3 study of the same students to examine their social emotional and academic achievements. Further researchers can explore and compare the teachers' experience of having students in the physical classroom.

## **Conclusion**

The six teachers in the study believed that TK should be a developmentally appropriate class, and they provided DAP experiences to the students. The six teachers worked hard in the difficult and unusual circumstances to offer as much social emotional interactions and activities that they could to their students. The circumstances they were attempting to accomplish were well out of their control.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused schools to close and shift to virtual learning. As a result, they were not able to provide students with the vibrant content of a classroom with hands-on materials that create inquiry and build on their multiple assets through observation of their interests. It is unfortunate that these circumstances prevented the teachers from fully executing their beliefs in the classrooms.

I would recommend that the educational leaders who oversee, guide, supervise and mentor TK teachers collaborate with the teachers to offer further guidance and professional development on how to make DAP more possible under such extreme difficult circumstances.

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