

Staying true to our principles

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With changes to the early years of schooling, the emphasis on a uniform curriculum framework, and the increased demand for accountability, early childhood professionals and teacher educators confront new challenges as well as opportunities. The keynote address presented key findings of research on effective early childhood curriculum and teaching and described ways the curriculum can be implemented to become more effective, while also preserving the fundamental values of the culture of early childhood education, including emphasis on the whole child and play.

In countries throughout the world, the early childhood context is changing rapidly, presenting new challenges for early childhood professionals. These changes reflect widespread recognition of the lasting benefits of high quality programs, particularly for children growing up in impoverished circumstances (for research, see www.nieer.org). Trends include: 1) movement toward universal voluntary programs for 4’s and even 3’s; 2) greater involvement by public schools (and Ministries of Education) as part of the EC delivery system; 3) increased demand for highly qualified teachers for young children; 4) greater emphasis on early learning standards, curriculum, and outcomes; and 5) increased demand for accountability.

Many early childhood professionals resist or react negatively to these trends because they perceive threats to some of the profession’s core values. Among these fundamental values of the field are: 1) valuing the whole child - a child development point of view; 2) the value of play for learning and development; 3) importance of relationships and sense of community; 4) valuing and teaching each child as an individual; 5) respecting linguistic and cultural diversity; and 6) promoting relationships with families.

At the same time, the last few decades have seen a considerable increase in the knowledge base about what kinds of developmental and learning outcomes predict later success in school and life (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001). Current research also provides a great deal of information about effective curriculum and teaching practices (Neuman & Dickinson 2001; Dickinson & Tabors 2001). The challenge for early childhood educators at all levels is to ensure that our practices reflect this current knowledge while also staying true to our principles and core values — a challenge but also an opportunity. Meeting this challenge will require greater agreement in the field about what constitutes effective curriculum and teaching strategies.

Curriculum is a written plan that describes the goals for children’s learning and development, and the experiences, materials, and teaching strategies that are used to help children achieve those goals. Traditionally, the field has been ambivalent if not hostile about curriculum. “Prescribed” curriculum or “scripted” curriculum is anathema to early educators, and as a result, confusion tends to reign in practice. Fearing bad practice, we have often warned teachers against curriculum, telling them what not to do, but failing to tell them what to do instead. In the United States, for decades,

one of the prevailing phrases was, “Curriculum is what happens”. This phrase actually was the title of a book published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children in 1977. Unfortunately, no one remembered that the book had a subtitle: *Planning is the Key!* With little emphasis on planning and less clarity about what children should be learning, the emphasis in early childhood until recently has been on the processes of teaching and learning rather than the content of the curriculum. Some people have continued to mistakenly think that NAEYC’s position statement on developmentally appropriate practice is a curriculum but it most assuredly is not.

Curriculum today goes beyond process to address both what to teach (the content to be learned) and when, with attention to the important sequences of development and learning, and on discipline-based knowledge about how abilities build on prior learning. For example, early childhood mathematics researchers provide guidance for which skills, concepts, and knowledge are the most foundational for later learning (NCTM & NAEYC 2002). Likewise, early literacy research identifies predictors that don’t guarantee later success in reading but certainly increase its likelihood (Neuman & Dickinson 2001). Planning curriculum based on these sources of information, as well as children’s predictable interests and abilities, ensures that it will be developmentally appropriate - that is, challenging and achievable for most children in the age range for which it’s intended (Copple & Bredekamp 2006; Bredekamp & Copple 1997).

To ensure that early childhood programs are effective and children reach their potential, curriculum should be planned and implemented based on several core principles (see Figure 1) (NAEYC/NAECS/SDE 2003; Bredekamp & Pikulski 2005). The implications of each of these principles are described briefly.

Overview of Principles of Effective Early Childhood Curriculum

- Comprehensive
- Integrated (meaning-centered)
- Balanced (investigation and focused, intentional teaching)
- Developmentally appropriate

- Recognizes and capitalizes on diversity
- Differentiates and individualizes instruction based on ongoing assessment
- Research and theory based
- Standards and learning outcomes based (reflecting important content of the disciplines)
- Respects and enhances family involvement
- Promotes teacher professional development

Comprehensive curriculum meets the needs of the whole child. It addresses all areas of development and learning: language and literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, social and emotional development, and physical development, and is culturally rich and reflective of the diversity of children and families served. Comprehensive curriculum reflects our knowledge that, “cognitive, social-emotional, and motor development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth, all requiring active attention in the preschool years (Bowman et al. 2001).

Integrated curriculum in which content and learning experiences are organized around bigger ideas or topics is effective because young children are meaning-makers. They need first-hand experience and context to make sense of their learning. Integrating learning around projects (which are an essential part, but not all of the curriculum) or science, math or social studies topics of study develops children’s background knowledge and vocabulary (key predictors of reading success). Perhaps, most importantly, integrated curriculum is based on developing and extending children’s interests during the early years when attention and self-regulation are developing abilities.

Balanced curriculum reflects the understanding that children learn valued content through both investigation and focused, intentional teaching. In a large-scale longitudinal study in England that included approximately 3000 children (Sylva et al 2004), the most effective preschools were found to provide both teacher-initiated group work including small group pre-planned experiences, and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities supported by teachers.

Similar results were found in a longitudinal study in the US (Dickinson & Tabors 2001) in which



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children were observed at home and in preschool at ages three and four and followed into school. That study found that children benefit from both well-organized group times and free choice times, but the benefits vary by the learning opportunity and teaching behavior in each setting. During group times, teacher explanatory talk and cognitively challenging vocabulary relates to children's kindergarten and first grade scores. During play times, children benefit when teachers engage in one-to-one conversations and when they have opportunities to talk with peers. The study also provides scientific support for the value of play. The research found consistent links between kindergarten measures and the total numbers of words and the variety of words that children used during free play. Across all three years, ages three to five, they found associations between the amount of time children engaged in pretending and their performance on outcome measures.

Another key principle of effective curriculum is that it be developmentally appropriate. The words 'developmentally appropriate' are so laden with baggage and misunderstandings, that their definition in this context is required. Knowledge of children's typical development and learning trajectories is useful in curriculum planning because it enables three predictions: when children generally reach certain developmental accomplishments; what children can do and understand within age ranges; and what content will be of interest as well as challenging and achievable for most children. After all, curriculum planning is essentially a prediction that gets modified and adapted during implementation based on assessment of individual children.

Two other key dimensions of child development knowledge are individual and cultural variation, each of which must be considered in curriculum planning and implementation. Ongoing assessment of children's capabilities helps teachers determine when, where, and how to provide individual assistance to children, and to provide adequate scaffolding - the appropriate amount and kind of support that helps children move to a new level of ability or understanding.

Capitalizing on children's cultural and linguistic diversity is necessary to engage and build on children's existing understandings, that is, to help children make sense of new learning in

relation to what they already know and can do. Of course, supporting children's cultural identity and competencies is key to supporting their overall development.

New knowledge challenges the field to ensure that the content of the early childhood curriculum reflects current research and also reflects those early learning standards and outcomes that are not only developmentally appropriate but also predictive of later school and life success. These include early literacy skills: phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, listening comprehension, vocabulary and world knowledge, but also motivation to become a reader and writer (Neuman & Dickinson 2001). Key social-emotional accomplishments include social skills and self-regulation, both of which are successfully developed through engagement in socio-dramatic play (Bodrova & Leong 2003; Bredekamp 2004). Mathematics skills such as number and operations, measurement, and beginning geometry are also key foundational abilities. These skills are evident in children's play such as their block building or using manipulative toys but they require adults to lend the experience the language of math for the play to become educationally effective (Seo & Ginsburg 2004; NAEYC & NCTM 2002).

Many early childhood educators reject standards-based curriculum because they think it will lead to standardization of teaching practices (which they assume will be bad practices). However, along with research about content, we also have research about effective teaching strategies such as interactive book reading in small groups, decontextualized talk in one-to-one conversations, dialogic reading questioning strategies, and sociodramatic play that are congruent with early childhood core values (Whitehurst & Lonigan 2001). In *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers* (2001) a prestigious panel of scientists addressed the question, how should teaching be done in preschool?

Research indicates that many strategies can work. Good teachers acknowledge and encourage children's efforts, model and demonstrate, create challenges and support children in extending their capabilities, and provide specific directions and instruction. All of these strategies can be used in the context of play and structured activities.



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We know that there are significant differences in children's vocabulary and other important skills at school entry based on family socioeconomic status (Hart & Risley 1995). Much of this important development and learning takes place "on our watch" and we as early childhood educators have tremendous opportunity to influence it for the good. It is our ethical responsibility to apply the knowledge base and engage in research-based curriculum and teaching practices that we know will benefit children.

Families matter. Families serve as key informants about their children's competencies in other contexts, and also as partners in the program. To implement individually, culturally, and linguistically appropriate curriculum is not possible without family involvement.

Most important, teachers matter. Curriculum is a research-based plan that describes learning experiences and teaching strategies related to children's acquiring important learning outcomes. To be effective, teachers must assess individual children's learning and development, and adapt curriculum (including schedule and grouping) and their teaching strategies and interactions with children to help them make continued progress. To achieve these goals, teacher education needs to prepare early childhood teachers to work with curriculum and curriculum frameworks, to understand important sequences of curriculum content (as well as development), and to use assessment information to adapt curriculum and teaching.

In early childhood curriculum today, what is important is both content, what children are learning, and process, when and how they are learning. Both content and process need greater attention if children are to benefit from early childhood programs - the most important early childhood values of all.

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