

# Principles of an Effective Preschool Curriculum

*Presented at NAEYC by Houghton Mifflin Pre-K authors Sue Bredekamp, Ph.D. and John J. Pikulski, Ph.D. on December 9, 2005.*

## Overview

- The early childhood context is changing rapidly, presenting new challenges and opportunities.
- Preschool curriculum can be improved to reflect new knowledge.
- Fundamental values of early childhood education can be retained and enhanced.

## Current Trends in ECE

- Movement toward universal, voluntary Pre-K for 4's and even 3's.
- Greater involvement in public schools as part of delivery system.
- Increased demand for highly qualified, BA degreed early childhood teachers.
- Greater emphasis on early learning standards, curriculum, and outcomes.

## Trends continued and connected

- States and federal polices call for Pre-K alignment with K–12.
- Impact of Early Reading First
- Head Start Reauthorization calls for scientifically-based (ERF-like) curriculum and enhanced K–12 alignment.
- All major publishers of K–12 school curriculum now have Pre-K.
- Reinvented NAEYC Accreditation System includes standard on curriculum.
- Criteria state: A clearly stated curriculum or curriculum framework provides a coherent focus for planning children's experiences. It allows for adaptations and modifications to ensure access to the curriculum by all children.
- Curriculum guides teachers' development and intentional implementation of learning opportunities consistent with the program's goals and objectives.

## Fundamental Values of ECE

- The whole child – A Child Development point of view
- The value of play for learning & development
- Importance of relationships and sense of community
- Valuing and teaching each child as an individual
- Respecting linguistic and cultural diversity
- Promoting relationships with families

## Curriculum Defined

- Curriculum is a written plan that describes:
  - the goals for children's learning and development, and
  - the learning experiences, materials, and teaching strategies that are used to help children achieve those goals.

(adapted from Head Start)

## Traditional EC View of Curriculum

- Emphasis on processes of teaching and learning more than content
- Curriculum is what happens...
- But planning is the key! (Dittman, 1977)

## **Curriculum Today**

- Curriculum is what to teach (content to be learned; scope) and when (important sequences based on continuum of development and learning).
- Scope & sequence consists of predictions based on knowledge of what is generally achievable and challenging for children within an age range (what is developmentally appropriate) and discipline-based knowledge about how abilities build on prior learning.

## **NAEYC/NAECS-SDE Position on Curriculum & Assessment**

- Calls for programs to implement curriculum that is:
  - Thoughtfully planned,
  - Challenging, engaging, and developmentally appropriate,
  - Culturally and linguistically responsive,
  - Comprehensive and likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children.

## **Indicators of Effective Curriculum (NAEYC/NAECS-SDE)**

- Children are active and engaged.
- Goals are clear and shared by all.
- Curriculum is evidence-based.
- Valued content is learned through investigation and focused, intentional teaching.
- Curriculum builds on prior learning and experiences.
- Curriculum is comprehensive.
- Professional standards validate the curriculum subject-matter content.
- Curriculum is likely to benefit children.

## **What are the elements of effective Pre-K curriculum? (Eager to Learn)**

- Cognitive, social/emotional, and motor development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth – all requiring active attention in the preschool years.
- Children who attend well-planned, high quality programs in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated tend to learn more and are better prepared to successfully master the complex demands of formal schooling.

## **Overview of Principles of Effective Pre-K 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 (content of the disciplines)
- Respects and enhances family involvement
- Promotes teacher professional development

## **Comprehensive Curriculum**

- Addresses the Whole Child
  - Language Development/Expansion
  - Early Literacy

Math, Science, Social Studies, and Arts Content  
Social and Emotional Development  
Physical Development  
Culturally Rich and Diverse

- May focus at times on one area

### **Integrated Curriculum**

- Children are meaning makers – they need first-hand experiences and context.
- Organizing learning around bigger ideas or themes (science, math, social studies topics that can be explored in greater depth) develops background knowledge and vocabulary.
- Developing and extending children’s interests is particularly important during preschool when attention and self-regulation are developing abilities.

### **Balanced Curriculum**

- Children learn valued content through investigation and focused, intentional teaching (NAEYC/NAECS).
- In large-scale early education observational study in England (EPPE, 2003), most effective preschools provide both teacher-initiated group work (including small group pre-planned experiences), and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities, supported by teachers.

### **Home-School Study of Language and Literacy (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001)**

- Children benefit from both well-organized group times and free-choice times.
- The benefits vary by learning opportunity and teaching behavior in each setting.
- During group times, teacher’ explanatory talk and cognitively challenging vocabulary relates to children’s kindergarten scores.
- During play times, children benefit when teachers engage in one-to-one conversations and when they have opportunities to talk with peers.

### **Developmentally Appropriate**

- Predicts when children generally reach certain developmental accomplishments.
- Predicts what children can do and understand within age ranges.
- Predicts what content will be of interest as well as challenging and achievable.

### **Differentiates and Individualizes Based on Ongoing Assessment**

- Responsive to inevitable individual variation,
- Uses concept of continuum of development and learning to 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.

### **Capitalizes on cultural and linguistic diversity**

- Engages and builds on children’s existing understandings.
- Helps children make sense of new learning in relation to what they already know and can do.
- Supports children’s cultural identity and competencies.

*All of the above information was presented by Dr. Bredekamp; Dr. Pikulski’s presentation begins*

*with the following:*

### **Implications of Pre-K Curriculum for Literacy Instruction**

- Research and theory based
- Standards and learning outcomes based

### **Why Literacy In Early Childhood?**

- To prevent and eradicate the need to correct/remediate reading disabilities.
- To raise the heretofore- stubbornly-flat, long term reading achievement.

“Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers should not to be expected to teach children to read; they should, however, be expected to build the foundation for success in learning to read. They, more than teachers at any other levels, can help ensure long term success in learning to read and the prevention of failure.” (Pikulski, 2005)

### **Emerging/Emergent Literacy**

“The acquisition of literacy is best conceptualized as a developmental continuum with its origin early in the life of a child, rather than an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school... suggesting that there is no clear demarcation between reading and prereading... Emergent literacy includes the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing.” (**Eager to Learn**, p. 186)

- Which two of the following four factors are the best predictors of beginning reading achievement?
  - A) oral language
  - B) concepts of print
  - C) letter familiarity \*
  - D) phonological awareness \*

“Correlations studies have identified phonological awareness and letter knowledge as the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of instruction.” (Report of the National Reading Panel, p. 7)

- Which of the following 4 factors is the most associated with high levels of reading achievement beyond the early stages of learning to read?
  - A) oral language \*
  - B) concepts of print
  - C) letter familiarity
  - D) phonological awareness

### **Research-Based Reading Programs**

- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Motivation

### **Research-Based Emerging Literacy Programs**

- Motivation
- Emerging Phonics
  - Phonemic Awareness
  - Letter Familiarity
  - Alphabetic Principle
  - Introduction to Letter Sounds
- Listening Comprehension
- Vocabulary/World Knowledge

### **Two Major Aspects of Reading**

- Word recognition; Decoding; Word pronunciation.
 

“The process of determining the pronunciation and some degree of meaning of a word in written or printed form.” (Harris and Hodges, 1995, p. 283)
- Reading Comprehension
 

“The process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.” (RRSG Report, p. xiii)

### **Emerging Literacy Factors: Implications from Research for Standards**

#### **Motivational Factors**

- Understanding the functions and value of learning to read
- Confidence in ability to learn to read

“I sometimes hear the comment from educators, particularly early childhood educators, that they find it difficult to compete with television and its bag of special effects tricks. No question, we are able to dazzle, but all that dazzle is no match for being there. The teacher is a real live human being, able to address directly the needs and desires of a specific child. There is magic all around the classroom. It is an ancient magic, and pity the teacher who is unaware of his or her powers!” (Robert Keeshan, 1981, Houghton Mifflin Reading Conference, Notre Dame University.)

#### **Alphabetical Principle**

- How many sounds are there in the American English language? 40–44

#### **Alphabetic Principle**

“English is an alphabetic language in that there is an orderly relationship between the phonemes (sounds) that make up the oral form of that language and the graphemes (letters and letter combinations such as “sh” and “th”) that make up the printed form of the language.” (Chard, Pikulski, and Templeton, 2001)

#### **A Continuum of Phonological Awareness Skills**

- Nursery rhymes (Reasonable for Pre-K)
- Rhyme (Reasonable for Pre-K)
- Beginning sounds (Reasonable for Pre-K)
- Syllables in spoken words (Maybe Pre-K, mostly K)
- Blending onsets and rimes (Mostly K)
- Words in oral sentences (Mostly K)
- Segmenting onsets and rimes (Mostly K)
- Blending phonemes (Mostly K)

- Segmenting phonemes (Caution)
- Manipulating Phonemes

### **Phonemic Awareness in Proper Perspective (The National Reading Panel, 1999)**

- Acquiring PA is ABSOLUTELY necessary for success in reading, but it is not an end unto itself. It is a means for using the alphabetic nature of our language.
- Children differ in the amount and form of PA they need.
- Too much time can be spent on PA activities. Effectiveness was greatest in experiments that provided between 5 and 18 hours of instruction. (Eighteen hours over 180 school days = 6 minutes a day).

### **Language Development**

#### **Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children** by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley.

“The finding is heartbreaking that by the time the children were three years old, **parents** in less economically favored circumstances had said fewer different words in their cumulative monthly vocabularies than had the **children** in the most economically advantaged families.” (p. xiii)

“Some things don’t matter: Race/ethnicity doesn’t matter, gender doesn’t matter, whether a child is first in a family or born later doesn’t matter. But what does matter, and it mattered a whole lot, is relative economic advantage.” (p. x)

“Particularly striking among the welfare parents was their resilience and persistence in the face of repeated defeats and humiliations, their joy in playing with their children, and their desire that their children do well in school. They could spend an hour on a bus holding a feverish child and wait longer than that in a public health clinic. But these parents did not take the bus to the zoo, or turn the television to Sesame Street, and they did not talk to their children very much.” (p. 69–70)

#### **Five Quality Features for Language Development**

- They just talked.
- They listened.
- They tried to be nice.
- They gave children choices.
- They told children about things. (p. 77)

#### **Average Rate of Meaning Vocabulary Growth in the Elementary Grades**

Rate = 2,500–3,000 words per year

Rate = About 15 words per school day

#### **First Principle of Vocabulary Development/Instruction**

- Expanding language skills, which necessitates teaching and developing vocabulary and background knowledge, is the most central, most important, and most challenging curricular task facing every teacher. It cannot be accomplished with a single set of techniques or strategies or even by a comprehensive published program. It requires directly, consciously, conscientiously, addressing language development and building background, both at dedicated time periods and throughout the school day. Building

vocabulary and world knowledge must also extend beyond school, into the home and extracurricular lives of our students.

### **Second Principle of Vocabulary Development/Instruction**

(based on Hart and Risley, 1995)

- Every time, well, almost every time, a child initiates talk to a teacher, particularly outside formal teaching situations, she or he should confirm the child's topic and ask the child to elaborate; if necessary, the teacher should model an elaboration, ask the child to imitate, and confirm the child's response.

### **Conclusions from Juel et al Study**

- Students demonstrated weaknesses in both foundations for letter-sound associations and oral vocabulary development when they began preschool.
- By the middle of first grade the decoding skills of these students were above average.
- The gap in vocabulary development showed no decrease.
- While substantial amounts of time were devoted to oral language activities, neither reading aloud to children, discussion of these readings nor mentioning of oral vocabulary seemed to affect vocabulary growth.
- Incidental instruction is not substantive enough to significantly boost oral language development for students who enter school with weak vocabularies.

(Juel, C. et al. (2003). **Walking with Rosie: A Cautionary Tale of Early Reading Instruction**. Educational Leadership, 60, 13–18.)

### **Vocabulary Emphasis in Read Alouds**

- Before reading, briefly
  - select and mention 3 or 4 words, and
  - have children orally repeat the words.
- During reading, briefly
  - highlight the word and repeat the sentence in which it occurs.
- After reading, more extensively

### **Research Based Read Aloud Recommendations**

- Carefully select books based on difficulty, interest, and instructional value.
- Build Background and Vocabulary before, during, and after reading.
- Reread some books several times.
  - Reread books selectively (some children become bored with rereadings of some books.)
- Do both whole class and small group read alouds.
- Read as least 50% informational texts.

The informational texts illustrated during the talk by J. Pikulski included the following:

**The Ocean Is...** by Norbert Wu

**On the Move** by Henry Pluckrose

**Building a Road: Machines at Work** by Henry Pluckrose

All of the texts are included in Houghton Mifflin Pre-K of which Drs. Bredekamp and Pikulski are authors along with Dr. Lesley Morrow.

*Dr. Pikulski's presentation ends here. The following was presented by Dr. Bredekamp:*

### **Families Matter**

- Families are key informants for teachers about children's competencies evidenced at home or acquired in diverse cultural contexts.
- Individually and culturally/linguistically appropriate curriculum is not possible without family involvement.
- Families can build on and support important curriculum content.

### **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, grouping) and their teaching strategies and interactions with children to help them continue to make progress.

### **EC Teacher Education**

- Needs to prepare teachers to work with curriculum or curriculum frameworks.
- Needs to help teachers understand important sequences of curriculum content as well as development and learning.
- Needs to teach ways of using assessment information to adapt curriculum and teaching strategies.
- Needs to teach teachers what to do, not just what not to do.

### **Conclusions**

- In curriculum today, what matters is:
  - Content (what children are learning), and
  - Process (when and how children are learning).
- Both content and process need greater attention if children are to benefit from early childhood programs—the most important early childhood value of all.

### **Never Forget:**

“When we adults think of children there is a simple truth which we (often) ignore: childhood is not preparation for life, childhood is life. A child isn't getting ready to live. A child is living.” (John Taylor, 1991, **Notes on an Unhurried Journey**)