On the Road to School Readiness

Office of Head Start Summit
February 15 – 17, 2011
Baltimore, MD

The Joy of Learning: Effective Curriculum & Assessment for Young Children

Presented by
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Overview

• The early childhood context is changing rapidly, presenting new challenges and opportunities – Head Start leads the way.
• Curriculum, assessment, and teaching need to be improved to reflect new knowledge.
• Fundamental values of ECE can be retained and enhanced.
• The wonder of children + the wonder of learning require wonderful curriculum & teaching
Fundamental Values of ECE

• The whole child – developmentally appropriate practices
• 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
Developmentally Appropriate, Effective Practices

• Meet each child where he or she is (on-going assessment)
• Use a wide repertoire of teaching strategies that vary for and adapt to the age, experience, interests, and abilities of individual children
• Help each child reach challenging and achievable goals (Head Start Child Development & Learning Framework)
Effective Teachers

- Create a caring community of learners
- Use emotionally supportive, instructionally effective teaching strategies
- Implement evidence-based “whole child” curriculum
- Assess (know) the whole child
- Establish reciprocal relationships with families
Intentional Teaching

- **Intentional teachers** have a purpose for the decisions they make and can explain that purpose to others
Intentional Teachers Are:
(Bredekamp, 2011)

• Caring and committed
• Enthusiastic and engaged
• Curious and creative
• Respectful and responsive
• Passionate and patient
• Purposeful and playful
• Focused and flexible
• Aware and accountable
• Informed and effective
• Listening and learning
TEACHERS MATTER

• Curriculum is a research-based plan that describes learning experiences and teaching strategies related to important learning & developmental outcomes

• To be effective, teachers must assess individual children’s learning and development, and

• Adapt curriculum, including class schedules, groupings of children, and their teaching strategies and interactions with children to help them continue to make progress
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
Effective Curriculum
Comprehensive or Focused

- Standards & research-based (FRAMEWORK)
- Integrated (meaning-centered)
- Involves intentional teaching
- Uses multiple learning contexts (small & large groups, centers, play, routines, transitions, outdoors)
- Engages and **cultivates** interests
- Recognizes and capitalizes on diversity
- Differentiates and individualizes instruction based on ongoing assessment
Integrated Curriculum

- Children are meaning-makers – they need first-hand experience and context.

- Organizing learning around bigger topics (projects, science, social studies, the arts that can be explored in-depth) develops background knowledge & vocabulary.

- Developing & extending interests is especially important during early childhood when attention and self-regulation are developing abilities.

- CAUTION: Integrating may prevent necessary focused time (PCER study found 58 seconds of math in an integrated “comprehensive” curriculum)
Balanced Curriculum

• Includes child-guided and teacher-guided experiences

• In large-scale early education observational study in England (EPPE, 2003), most effective preschools provided both teacher-initiated group work (including small group pre-planned experiences), and

• Freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities, supported by teachers.
Curriculum Content & Developmental Science

• Domain-general (foundational) processes, -- apply across developmental areas and/or subject matter disciplines -- Underlying skills that make learning possible and predict success in school and life

• Domain-specific abilities, apply to one or a limited number of domains of knowledge such as science, mathematics, or literacy

• BOTH are important & are included in the Framework
Approaches to Learning

• BOTH positive emotions and motivation
• AND engaged actions and behaviors: focused attention, persistence, planning, flexible problem-solving
• Children need playful learning and learningful play
• Learning Content + Learning-related Behaviors or Approaches to Learning
Evidence-based Language & Early Literacy Programs

• Motivation and book appreciation
• Vocabulary and world knowledge
• Listening/reading comprehension
• Phonemic awareness & phonics
• Alphabet knowledge
• Print awareness
• Early writing
Early Mathematics

• Important Pre-K math skills – number and operations, geometry and spatial relations, and measurement – are strongest predictor of school success

• Children’s play is rich in everyday math regardless of SES (Ginsburg, et al.)

• Children’s math learning varies based on the degree to which adults use math language

• In addition to everyday math, teachers need to make a coherent curriculum plan if children are to learn important math concepts (National Research Council, 2009)
Social Emotional Accomplishments
(From Neurons to Neighborhoods, 2000)

• Negotiating the transition from external controls to self-regulation – learning to regulate one’s emotions, behaviors, and attention
• Learning to relate well to other children and forming friendships
• Acquiring the capabilities that are the foundations of communication and language
Self-Regulation

• Ability to regulate emotions, behavior, & thinking according to the demands of the situation (eg. delay of gratification, effortful control)

• To STOP doing something that is UNNECESSARY, even if you want to continue AND to START doing something that is NECESSARY, even if you don’t want to (Boyd et al., 2003)

• Self-regulation measured in preschool predicts school success (literacy & math)over and above cognitive skills and family background (Blair & Razza, 2007; McClelland, Acock & Morrison, 2006)

• Problems in self-regulation are strongly related to learning difficulties and poor social relationships
Representation

• A lay-person’s definition: using one thing to stand for another.
• Mental representations are crucial for higher-level thinking.
• Verbal language is a representation of physical objects, experiences, feelings, and concepts.
• Written language is an obvious example of symbolic representation.
• Developing symbolic representation is essential for reading & math – the most fundamental skill for school success.
Role of Play

• Vygotsky & play = the leading behavior in children’s development, “the preeminent educational activity of early childhood”

• During play, children behave beyond their current level of independent mastery.

• Children develop representational abilities through pretend play using objects and actions as symbols & become more able to take another’s perspective.

• Socio-dramatic play with its system of roles and rules is unique in its support of self-regulation.
What teaching strategies are most effective in Pre-K?

• “…. 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.” (Eager to Learn, 2000)
Effective Teachers:

- Provide more experiences to promote self-regulation and other cognitive processes such as:
  - Choices so children can self-regulate
  - Planning and “revisiting” opportunities
  - Ways of representing thinking and feelings
  - Small group work for children to discover their own & others’ ideas, and negotiate different perspectives (difficult for them to do with adults)
  - Teacher-supported socio-dramatic play AND

- Fewer experiences that interfere with or diminish children’s capacity to self-regulate such as extended periods of whole group instruction or waiting during routines and transitions.
“Every small child is always an exception.”
Loris Malaguzi, 1993
References


• Vygotsky, L. S. 1977. Play and its role in the mental development of the child.
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