

Which Way Should We Go from Here?

Some Thoughts about Early Childhood Curriculum

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Curriculum is a dynamic process and a product of its time. Its content evolves and changes in response to the historical moment, politics, the changing knowledge about children and about subject matter. We sometimes describe the process as an educational pendulum that swings from an emphasis on the needs and interests of children to a focus on subject matter to be mastered. Today the pendulum has definitely swung to the subject matter side of the continuum.

Many early childhood educators are concerned about how we can respond to the current focus on content and accountability without losing our historical commitment to child-centered, humanistic practice. I hope that in this age of accountability we will remember to give curriculum the same serious thought that we are giving to standards and assessment.

Standards as a basis of support

From the sessions I attended at this NAEYC National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, I see a lot of productive thought and work going on regarding how we can use standards as the basis for supporting and improving learning opportunities for young children. Sessions on math, literacy, and dance standards were guides for improving curriculum planning. Other sessions focused on selecting appropriate curriculum for particular groups of children, using a quality-rating system to provide a foundation for appropriate curriculum, aligning curriculum with state standards, and integrating math, literacy, and the development of social-emotional skills.

Several excellent sessions drew our attention to standards that could be used in support of appropriate play-based activities, emergent curriculum, and the project approach. Presenters stressed that meaningful play-based learning can lead to acquisition of the standards and be assessed by authentic means. Sessions addressing the social-emotional development of children and cultural issues also had important implications for what we teach young children and how.

We need to find ways to include in our standards those things we value most or find ways to address them along with the standards.

Challenges ahead

I have expressed my concerns about the proliferation of standards, and although still concerned, I am heartened by the thoughtful work presented at the institute by early childhood educators. Based on my understanding of early childhood curriculum and what I have heard educators saying at this institute, I identify four important challenges in learning to embrace standards while doing what is best for young children.

1. Focus on the *why* of curriculum

Remembering to focus on the *why* of curriculum may be the greatest challenge. We need to keep in mind what it is we are trying to accomplish for children and for society.

The Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland* said something that can be applied very well to early childhood education. As Alice was wandering in the woods, a smile appeared in a tree and slowly materialized into a cat. Alice inquired, “Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the cat.

How can we decide what we are going to do, if we do not know where we are going? The Cheshire Cat’s response provides us with a central question that can guide thoughtful curriculum planning: What am I trying to accomplish as a teacher—for children and for society? In making your choices, it is critical to keep in mind where you want to get to.

We all have values we want our society to embody, and all teachers want

the children they teach to be creative, productive citizens in the future. But values vary in the extent to which they emphasize different aims and goals. Like Alice, most teachers want to get somewhere, and most have some specific goals in mind. And they wish for the paths they walk with children to be pleasant and productive ones.

How can we make this happen? I hope you will think about your aims for the education of young children and make sure they are reflected in the standards you use and in your classroom practice. If we neglect doing this, we may lose track of what we most desire for children. We might be busy focusing on bits of content

instead of the bigger picture of the kinds of knowledge and skills children must have to succeed both as students and as citizens in the future.

Let us look critically at our standards to see if they address aims like creativity, empathy, problem solving, being part of a community, learning to live in a democratic society, practicing social justice, and many others. We need to find ways to include in our standards those things we value most or find ways to address them along with the standards.



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2. Keep children at the center of practice

Children are at the center of our practice. Standards must be addressed in ways that will allow us to preserve a teacher's love of teaching and children's love of learning. What I have heard at this institute persuades me that we can do this, but we need to be vigilant in ensuring that the use of standards is, first of all, beneficial to children. Standards too should help us to evolve and improve our practice rather than stultify it.

There are many ways to address any standard. Remembering this, we want to be clear that standards are not curriculum; they are guidelines for the development of curriculum. We need to find ways to address standards without standardizing the curriculum and to tailor our programs to the specific groups of children we serve and to unique individuals within the groups. We need to be sure that what we teach addresses the cultural backgrounds of the children we serve and is responsive to their social-emotional development. At the same time, we don't want to lose track of the social-emotional development of children.

3. Embrace the intellectual, continue the experiential

To use standards to make us aware of meaningful content for young children while continuing to do those things that early childhood teachers have always done well, this is the third challenge. Keep on supporting children's play, providing nurturing relationships, and offering opportunities for hands-on experiential learning.

At this institute I noticed how much more comfortable we are becoming about acknowledging the *intellectual* (also referred to as *academic*) aspect of our work with young children. I hope too that we embrace the intellectual in ways that are substantive and child centered like the Project Approach,

Bank Street's curriculum based on community exploration, and other methods that help children learn to appreciate and understand the world they live in. These approaches are consistent with Maria Montessori's view that the universe is the child's curriculum (Montessori [1949]1995). I believe that these approaches that support children's growing understanding of the world are much preferable to a curriculum that focuses on unconnected bits of information and skills.

Curriculum can engage children in worthwhile experiences and help them learn meaningful and interesting things about their world. I believe strongly that early

childhood curriculum should honor children as meaning makers deserving of content about the world that is real, interesting, and has intellectual integrity. In other words, what we teach and what children learn should be

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worth knowing. And while language, literacy, and math skills are important in today's educational climate, it is important to remember that they are best learned in the context of a rich, exciting curriculum.

Teachers who survive and thrive in a standards environment tend to have a vision of what they want to accomplish, a strong knowledge base, support from their administrators, and quite a bit of freedom to select what and how to teach.

4. Strengthen preparing and practicing teachers

The final challenge is helping those who work with young children and those preparing to be early childhood educators to provide or learn to provide a child-centered approach in their practice, while coping with a proliferation of curriculum standards and accountability demands. As a profession we need to do everything we can to help them learn to implement standards and preserve what the early childhood field believes best for children.

Carol Anne Wien's book *Negotiating Standards in the Primary Classroom: The Teacher's Dilemma* is helpful in understanding what teachers are experiencing and how to support them (2004). Wien found that teachers who negotiated standards and maintained appropriate practice selectively discerned which standards could be stressed and which could be deemphasized and integrated into subject areas in their teaching. She learned that teachers who survive and thrive in a standards environment tend to have a vision of what they want to accomplish, a strong knowledge base, support from their administrators, and quite a bit of freedom to select what and how to teach. We can work to provide these qualities and strengths for all the early childhood educators and prospective teachers in our communities.

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It is a challenge to be an early childhood educator today. I hope this institute energized you, strengthened your commitment, and renewed your vision of what is best for young children.

Reference

- Montessori, M. 1995 [1949]. *The absorbent mind*. Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
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