



## Preschool Programs: Effective Curricula

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### **Topic**

*Preschool programs*

### **Introduction**

High quality early care and education has been associated with both short-term and long-term cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for young children's development. When quality is discussed, it is typically measured by two dimensions: (1) *process* variables (e.g., the nature of children's interactions with adult caregivers) and (2) *structural* variables (e.g., the characteristics that can be regulated by policy and that create beneficial conditions for children's development, including adult:child ratios, group size, and teacher training).<sup>1,2</sup> In discussions of quality, curriculum – or the content of what is taught to children – has not been the focal point until recently.

### **Subject**

Throughout the evolution of early childhood education, curriculum has been entangled, and often confused, with important and related issues (i.e., beliefs, learning theories/pedagogies, and skills/standards). Curriculum is different from, but reflects, guiding principles or beliefs about children and their learning. Three beliefs prevail in the field today: (a) children are competent and eager learners whose natural curiosity yields rich learning trajectories; (b) children learn in an integrated way, so that specific subject area learnings (e.g., math, science, language) best take place within the context of child-generated experiences (e.g., cooking, gardening, constructing); and (c) children need exposure to all domains of development – physical and motor, language, cognitive, social and emotional – so no single domain takes precedence over any other.<sup>3,4</sup>

Curriculum is also different from, but closely linked to, learning theories and pedagogies. Behaviourist theories of child development led to highly didactic models of direct instruction in which teachers typically present discrete facts to the entire class of children in whole groups. Maturationist theories of child development, where children are allowed to develop at their own pace, advanced pedagogy and curricula that enable children to direct their own learning. Constructivist theories of child development advanced pedagogy wherein children are active partners with their socio-cultural environment, including teachers and peers.

Finally, curriculum is different from, but supportive of, children's skills and behaviours. Curriculum is intended to encourage learning processes (e.g., attention, observation, memory), cognitive skills (e.g., reasoning, comparing and contrasting, classification), and the acquisition of specific information (e.g., the names of numbers and letters of the alphabet). In this sense, curriculum is sometimes confused with standards or expectations of what children should know and do.

Curriculum, then, must be clearly understood for what it is and for what it uniquely contributes to early care and education. Curriculum is the content of what is taught and what is learned.

### **Problems**

There are three central problems to understanding the effectiveness of curricula in early childhood programs. First, there is a persistent lack of clarity about the distinctions between curriculum and pedagogy. Second, there is no clear evidence of the comparative effectiveness of specific curricula; past efforts to compare curricular models have not identified one as clearly superior to others. Third, it is difficult to evaluate a curriculum's effectiveness given its interaction with other social and educational factors. Child results are contingent not only on the curriculum, but also on children's temperament, family background, social class, cultural traditions, and the qualifications and qualities of the classroom teacher.<sup>3,5</sup>

### **Research Context**

Amidst the current quest to achieve better outcomes for young children, there is growing momentum to shift from a focus on all the domains of development to those that promote a greater emphasis on literacy, language, and numeracy. Early educators report feeling pressure to stress academic curricular areas from kindergarten teachers who, in turn, report pressure from primary teachers to concentrate on a more limited range of subject areas.<sup>6</sup> Such a shift in focus is manifest formally in new guidelines directing programs to focus more heavily in these areas.<sup>7</sup>

### **Key Research Questions**

The search for effective curricula persists, with the federal government in the United States currently funding randomized clinical trials to compare various curriculum models to determine whether one or more curricula produce educationally meaningful effects for children's language skills, pre-reading and pre-math abilities, cognition, general knowledge, and social competence at the end of preschool and through the end of first grade.

### **Recent Research Results**

While data have not yet deemed any particular curricular model to be more effective than others, scholars and major national organizations in the field have recommended indicators of effectiveness that entwine curriculum and pedagogy including the following:<sup>3,5,8-10</sup>

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- *Children are active and engaged.* Children learn best by exploring and thinking about all sorts of phenomena. As such, children need to be active in their learning, not just cognitively, but also physically, socially, and artistically. Effective curriculum ensures that important concepts are taught through projects, every day experiences, collaborative activities, and an active curriculum.
- *Goals are clear and shared by all.* Curriculum goals should be clearly defined, shared, and understood by all adults who have a stake in children's learning (e.g., families, teachers, program administrators). The curriculum and related teaching strategies should be designed to help achieve goals in a unified, coherent way.
- *Teachers have frequent, meaningful interactions with children.* As already noted, curriculum and the content of what young children need to learn, know, and be able to do is closely linked with pedagogy and how such content is delivered. As a consequence, curriculum implementation relies primarily on teachers and the nature of teacher/child interactions. Teachers' engagement with children also allows them to regularly assess each child's progress and make adjustments in the classroom as necessary. Effective pedagogical and assessment strategies rely to a large extent on teachers' experience levels and educational backgrounds. To support effective teaching, curriculum should be linked to on-going professional development for teachers.
- *Curriculum is evidence-based.* The curriculum should be based on evidence that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically relevant for the children who will experience the curriculum. It should be organized around principles of child development and learning. When subject-specific curricula are adopted, they should also meet the standards of relevant professional organizations (e.g., the National Council of Teachers of English or the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics).
- *Curriculum builds on children's prior learning and experiences.* The content and implementation of the curriculum should build on children's prior individual, age-related, and cultural learning and be inclusive of children with disabilities. In addition, curriculum should support the knowledge that children gain from their families and communities and support children whose home language is not English in building a solid base for later learning. Effective curricula offer guidance, adaptations, and specific strategies to differentiate teaching and classroom activities according to the characteristics and backgrounds of the children.
- *Curriculum is comprehensive.* In spite of pressures to emphasize language, literacy, and mathematics, the curriculum should encompass all areas of development including children's physical health; well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development, and cognition and general knowledge. Rather than adopting a didactic, school-based approach in which each subject is taught distinctly and at separate times, curricula in early care and education should explicitly integrate learning across domains.

- *Curriculum is aligned with learning standards and appropriate assessments.* Increasingly, policy-makers and practitioners alike are concerned with improving children's learning experiences. This concern is manifest in the increased attention to a systemic and systematic approach to accountability that sets specific learning outcomes (i.e., early learning standards), guidance on what content to deliver to young children (i.e., curriculum), and assessment procedures that document children's progress. However, attending to each independently is insufficient; effective curriculum is well aligned with standards and assessments.

### **Conclusions**

Curriculum, or the content of what children learn, is central to supporting and strengthening young children's learning and development because it is the "front line" of children's experiences. Curriculum is different from beliefs about children, pedagogy, learning standards, and children's skills. Nonetheless, curriculum is central not only to the knowledge and skills children gain, but also to the application of particular pedagogical approaches and to the nature of teacher/caregiver-child interactions. With increasing numbers of children in early care and education programs, coupled with the increasing focus on school readiness, effective curriculum is crucial. Moreover, as the press for accountability increases, children must be exposed to the content for which they and their teachers will be held accountable.

### **Implications**

Given the diversity of young children in early care and education programs, it is unlikely that the field will or should come to consensus on the superiority of a single curricular model. Effective curricula rely on a balance between a clearly defined structure that impacts all children and flexibility that allows for individualization for children, families, and classrooms. Curriculum research must, therefore, discern the conditions under which certain curricula work best for certain children. Specifically, next generation research must examine which approaches produce educationally meaningful effects in which domains of development, for which children, under what social conditions, and with what kinds of professional preparation for teachers. Beyond, but embracing the research agenda, it is also crucial that curricula be understood as conceptually distinct from pedagogy despite their inextricable linkages in practice.

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