THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM

Suzanne L. Krogh • Kristine L. Slentz

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CONTENTS

To OUR READERS AND THEIR INSTRUCTORS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES xiii
PREFACE xv

1 PLANNING AND CREATING THE CURRICULUM 2
Chapter Objectives 2
Currently Recognized Curricular Concepts 3
Integrated Curriculum 3
Emergent Curriculum 4
Theme-Based Learning or Thematic Curriculum 4
Subject-Based, Discipline-Based, or Traditional Curriculum 5
Philosophically Prescribed Curriculum 5
Pushed-Down and Watered-Down Curricula 6
Individualized Educational Plans 7
A Few Curricular Approaches to Avoid 7
Curriculum-Based Assessment 8
NAEYC Curriculum Guidelines 8
Planning the Curriculum 9
Planning Lessons and Activities 10
Adaptations and Modifications for Children With Special Needs 10
Maintain Responsibility for Learning Outcomes of Every Child 11
Check for Prerequisite Skills 11
Break Curriculum Goals Into Smaller Steps 12
Provide for Repetition 12
Plan for Generalization 12
Identify Specialists and Technology Resources 13
Some Basic Formats for Planning 13
Title 14
Subject(s) 14
Domain(s) 14
Goals and Objectives 15
Materials 16
Time 16
Procedure 17
Assessment 18
Evaluation 18
Simplifications 20
Extensions of Learning 22
Helpful Hints for Next Time 22
Sample Lesson Plan for Primary Grades 23
Sample Activity Plan for Preschool 24
Making the Formats Your Own 24
Planning the Daily Schedule 25
Arrival Time 25
Indoor Activity Time 26

Материал, защищенный авторским правом

Outdoor Activity Time 27
Lunchtime and Snacks 27
Ending the Day 28
Creating the Curriculum 28
Older Toddlers and Young Preschoolers 29
Primary Children 31
Extending Your Learning 35
Vocabulary 35
Internet Resources 36
References 36
2 LANGUAGE AND LITERACY: SPEAKING, WRITING, AND READING 38
Chapter Objectives 38
Episode 1: Raising the Test Scores 39
Episode 2: Whole Language, Whole Child 40
Perspectives on History and Theory 42
Early Views of Teaching 42
The 20th and 21 st Centuries 43
Perspectives on Development 49
Theories of Language Acquisition 49
Linguistic Systems and Children's Language Development 51
Diversity Among Children 53
Curriculum Considerations for Children With Special Needs 53
Sensory Impairments 53
Cognitive Impairments 54
Physical Impairments 54
Cultural Considerations 55
Giftedness 57
Focus on Language and Literacy: Systemic Elements of Communication 58
Oral Language 58
Infants 58
Toddlers 59
Preschoolers 59
Primary Children 61
Writing 61
Reading 64
Language and Literacy Activities Across the Curriculum 67
Extending Your Learning 72
Vocabulary 72
Internet Resources 73
References 73
3 MATHEMATICS: How MUCH, How MANY, WHAT SIZE, WHAT SHAPE 76
Chapter Objectives 76
Three Ways of Looking at Arithmetic: One Teacher's Experience 78
Perspectives on History and Theory 80
NCTM Principles and Standards and the NAEYC Position 83
Perspectives on Development 85
Cognitive Development 85
Social and Affective Development 86

Материал, защищенный авторским правом

Physical Development 88
Diversity Among Children 88
Curriculum Considerations for Children With Special Needs 89
Sensory Impairments 89
Cognitive Impairments 90
Physical Impairments 91
Cultural Considerations 91
Poverty 91
Giftedness 92
Focus on Mathematics: Concepts 92
Classification 92
Ordering (Seriation) 94
Counting 95
Addition and Subtraction 96
Measuring 98
Geometry 100
Math Activities Across the Curriculum 102
Extending Your Learning 107
Vocabulary 108
Internet Resources 109
References 109
4 SCIENCE: CURIOSITY ABOUT THEIR WORLD 110
Chapter Objectives 110
First Graders Meet Their Environment 111
Perspectives on History and Theory 113
A Theory of Early Science Learning for Today 115
Applying Constuctivist Theory in the Classroom 116
Perspectives on Development 119
Cognitive Development 119
Social and Affective Development 120
Physical Development 121
Diversity Among Children 121
Curriculum Considerations for Children With Special Needs 122
Sensory Impairments 122
Cognitive Impairments 122
Physical Impairments 124
Cultural Considerations 124
Giftedness 124
Focus on Science: The Disciplines 124
Physical Sciences 125
Biological Sciences 128
Technology 129
Curiosity: Critical to Science Learning and Beyond 132
A Science Theme: Getting to Know Marine Life 134
Science Activities Across the Curriculum 135
Resources for Teaching Science 139
Extending Your Learning 140
Vocabulary 141

Материал, защищенный авторским правом

Internet Resources 141
References 142
5 SOCIAL STUDIES: LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER 144
Chapter Objectives 144
Suzanne's Hands-On Social Studies in the Kindergarten 146
Perspectives on History and Theory 147
Perspectives on Development 149
Cognitive Development 150
Social and Affective Development 152
Diversity Among Children 154
Curriculum Considerations for Children With Special Needs 155
Sensory Impairments 155
Cognitive Impairments 156
Cultural Considerations 156
Social and Affective Impairments 157
Giftedness 157
Focus on Social Studies: The Disciplines 158
History 159
Time 159
Continuity 160
Change 160
The Past 160
Geography 160
Sociology 161
Anthropology 162
Economics 162
Political Science 162
Values Education 163
A Social Studies Theme: Conflict Resolution 165
Dealing With Conflict 166
Conflicts Large and Small 166
De-escalating Conflict 168
Social Studies Activities Across the Curriculum 169
Extending Your Learning 174
Vocabulary 175
Internet Resources 175
References 175
6 THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS: CREATIVITY IN ACTION 178
Chapter Objectives 178
Perspectives on Development 179
Cognitive Development 180
Social and Affective Development 180
Physical Development 181
Reflexive Movement Phase 182
Rudimentary Movement Phase 182
Fundamental Movement Phase 183
Sport-Related Movement Phase 185
Diversity Among Children 185

Материал, защищенный авторским правом

Curriculum Considerations for Children With Special Needs 186
Sensory Impairments 186
Cognitive Impairments 187
Physical Impairments 187
Chronic Illness, Abuse, and Trauma 187
Giftedness 187
Focus on the Expressive Arts: Developmental Stages 188
Art 188
Infants and Toddlers 188
Preschoolers and Early Kindergartners 188
Late Kindergartners and Primary Children 189
Implications for Teaching 190
Materials and Activities 193
Painting 193
Drawing 194
Construction 194
Art Appreciation 195
Music 196
Birth to 6 Months 197
Six Months to 1 Year 197
One to 3 Years 197
Three to 4 Years 197
Four to 6 Years 197
Primary Years 198
Implications for Teaching 198
Infants 199
Toddlers 199
Preschoolers 199
Late Preschoolers and Kindergartners 200
Primary Children 200
Movement 200
Implications for Teaching 201
Dance 202
Drama 204
Expressive Arts Activities Across the Curriculum 205
Creativity: A Final Word 208
Creativity and Development 208
Fostering and Supporting Creativity in the Center or School 211
Extending Your Learning 212
Vocabulary 213
Internet Resources 214
References 214

AUTHOR INDEX 217
SUBJECT INDEX 221

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To OUR READERS AND THEIR INSTRUCTORS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The book you are now beginning is one of a series of four interrelated texts. Taken together, they provide an introduction to the broad field of early childhood education. Usually, such introductions are provided to students in one large survey textbook. Over the years, however, our knowledge of early development as it relates to education has increased enormously at the same time that legislative and cultural issues have grown in number. Add to that the fact that more and more early childhood centers and classrooms include youngsters who would once have been segregated in self-contained special education classes and it becomes evident that now all teachers of young children need to understand development and education across a broad spectrum of abilities. We thus are faced with a problem: Introductory textbooks must either get much longer and heavier, or simply skate across the surface of their topics.

Meanwhile, college and university instructors must decide how to fit this expanded knowledge and information into their courses. The answers they arrive at are many and various, making the traditional all-purpose textbook a source of frustration for many.

This series of textbooks has been designed to alleviate the frustration by offering four modules divided by general subject areas:

- an overview of history and the current field of early education;
- typical and atypical growth and development, infancy through the third grade;
- models and methods of teaching and guiding behavior; and
- curriculum, with a focus on preschool and the primary grades.

By creating this modular scheme, we have been able to treat each topic in more depth and incorporate discussions of abilities and needs across all levels, including developmental delays and giftedness. Instructors are invited to mix and match the texts as appropriate to their own interests and needs.

The titles of the four books in the series are:

Volume L: Early Childhood Education: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Volume II: Early Childhood Development and Its Variations

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Volume III: Teaching Young Children

Volume IV: The Early Childhood Curriculum

We hope you find this new approach to early childhood courses a useful and refreshing one. We welcome your feedback and ideas.

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PREFACE

The word *curriculum* refers to the collection of courses designated by a school or university. For the most part, the identity and content of the courses are determined by what is found useful to a particular society. Once, the study of Latin was considered a basic for the creation of educated gentlemen; today, it is difficult to find a class in it. Instead, college students—both male and female—opt for courses in languages that will provide practical knowledge for their upcoming careers.

School and university curricula are traditionally divided into rigidly defined segments known as *subjects,* with elementary school subjects being more general and basic (math, social studies) and high school or university subjects being more specialized and narrow (calculus, anthropology).

For early childhood education, the traditional definition of curriculum and division into subjects presents something of a challenge when we also consider the need to teach in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and even primary grade children don't look at learning as divided into adult-defined categories. All of life is their school, and designating some of it as math or science or art can be an intrusion on their more integrated approach to learning. (We might do well to consider if the same could often be true at the adult level as well!) Yet, adults who have become teachers are accustomed to using subject areas as a convenient way to categorize and make sense of the content of learning. These two conflicting variables—the needs and interests of children versus those of adults —create a dilemma for the early childhood practitioner. Should curriculum description and design be approached from the more holistic child-view or from the structured adult definition?

For the purposes of this text, we answer: both. Traditional subjects—reading, language arts, math, science, social studies, art, music, movement—offer an organizing framework or a series of checkpoints for the adult curriculum planner. That is, subject areas can be considered and then combined into a more meaningful whole; or, the more meaningful interests can be considered first, then later categorized into subjects. Teachers who work with infants, toddlers, and younger children can generally plan curriculum with little regard for formal subjects. Teachers in the primary grades, and even kindergarten, have a greater responsibility for dealing with them. While they can frequently integrate subjects, awareness of, and concern for, each one is an important part of curriculum planning.

The structure of this textbook considers the differing needs of teachers at the varying age levels. Chapter 1 provides an overview of curriculum design, with

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statements from professional organizations on what is appropriate for young children, including those with special needs. In addition, there are some practical suggestions for creating activities, lessons, and schedules. A theme that runs throughout is that of curriculum integration, as that is the way young children most naturally learn.

This theme is continued in the succeeding chapters, although they are divided into the traditional curricular subjects, one or more subjects per chapter. As appropriate, there are position statements and benchmarks for learning as provided by national subject-matter organizations. These are important for teachers to know so that they have standards and goals in mind as they plan their children's learning. At the same time, each chapter also provides suggestions for integrating its subject matter with other subjects and with children's more natural learning.

The balance between naturally integrated learning and subject-oriented curriculum is a theme throughout this entire text. The chances are good that this same balance is one that you will need to achieve in your professional career as well.

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CHAPTER 1
PLANNING AND CREATING THE CURRICULUM

Curriculum is happening all around the home, the school, the playground, and wherever young children gather. Perceptive teachers can help enrich and enhance what is happening.

Barbara J.Taylor

▼ *Chapter Objectives*

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

▼ Identify the positions of the NAEYC and DEC regarding appropriate curriculum for young children.

▼ Define the differences and benefits of an emergent and a traditional curriculum.

▼ Define an integrated curriculum, and explain how one works as well as its pros and cons.

▼ Explain the similarities and differences in curricular approaches for different ages and abilities of children.

As you think about and apply chapter content on your own, you should be able to:

▼ Create plans for activities and lessons.

▼ Observe the ways in which curriculum emerges from children and is designed by adults.

▼ Integrate assessment techniques into curricula you develop.

▼ Consider a range of learning needs when developing curricula.

The terms *instruction* and *methodology* refer to the ways in which we teach children; *curriculum* is the content that is taught. This chapter and those following are devoted to the content of children's learning, although at times the instructional implications also are discussed.

In the United States, there is no national curriculum to tell every teacher what should be taught and in what order, although discussions about creating just such a unified approach occasionally occur during policy discussions about school improvement. Since the late 1980s, a national curriculum that includes early

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childhood has been instituted in Great Britain. Its critics "note the irony in a capitalist, free-market-loving government's enacting such a curriculum" (Unks, 1995, p. 422), and it may be this disconnect that ultimately keeps the United States from creating similar nation-wide requirements at any grade level.

At this time, curriculum in the public schools is typically decided by local school districts or, at least in part, by individual schools. Nonpublic schools, particularly preschools and child-care centers, must decide for themselves what is important content for their young learners. For the early years, more than with any other age group, the *what* of children's learning is the responsibility of the teacher, working either alone or in cooperation with others in the school or center. Thus, if you find yourself working with prekindergarten youngsters, you will need extensive knowledge about developmentally appropriate curriculum. One could also argue that the same is true for teachers of older children. Although state and district education agencies generally have much to say about what should be learned between kindergarten and the third grade, an aware teacher is in a better position to make decisions about what to emphasize, what can be visited just briefly, ways in which some curricula can be integrated, and how best to prepare children for the inevitable standardized tests.

CURRENTLY RECOGNIZED CURRICULAR CONCEPTS

In your course work and in centers and schools, you will come in contact with a variety of terms that pertain to curriculum decisions for early learning. Some of these represent concepts currently accepted by early childhood specialists, and some are decried as inappropriate, even though they are perhaps popular. Major curricular terms in American early education today include the following. If you have read other books in this series, some of the curricular concepts will be familiar to you.

Integrated Curriculum

When academic subjects are brought together to make a more meaningful learning experience, we say that the curriculum has been integrated. For high school and college courses, this may mean joining two classes in a team-teaching endeavor. In the early childhood years, during which formal courses are not the norm, integration frequently takes place as part of an emergent curriculum or theme-based learning, both of which are described in the sections that follow. A slightly different approach is to "begin with the discipline frameworks and identify the connections, the ways that curriculum can be integrated and made more meaningful for learners. Integrated curriculum is the answer to achieving coverage of the curriculum while also promoting meaningfulness" (Bredecamp, 1997, p. xvi).

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Emergent Curriculum

This term was first coined by Elizabeth (Betty) Jones (1970) in a publication from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and has since entered the vocabulary of all early educators who value learning that comes from and is determined by the daily lives of young children and their caregivers and teachers. Arguing against formulaic curricula and commercial packages that seem to promise magical results, Jones and John Nimmo (1994) said that “there is no magic except the magic we create for ourselves.” It is children who “are the wizards, inviting us to join them in their magic making” (p. 3). Yet, Jones (1999) pointed out that emergent curriculum “is scary for some teachers. For those who haven’t yet learned how to plan well, it may be too much to undertake.” She added, however, that “for those with some practice in observing and reflecting on child behavior, it’s a well-timed challenge in taking children’s interests seriously and becoming co-players with them” (p. 16).

There are currently two well-known models of emergent curriculum. The first model is from the United States and is called *the project approach* in which teachers and primary grade children negotiate, plan, and participate in an in-depth study of their choice (Katz & Chard, 1989). Such studies might last for a few weeks or even months. The second model can be found in the city preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Here too, the children and teachers negotiate their choices, planning, and learning. Because the children are generally too young to communicate their learning and research findings through the written word, they are encouraged to explore and share their ideas through the arts.

Theme-Based Learning or Thematic Curriculum

A theme or central idea is selected by the teacher, and related learning activities then are designed and taught. Proponents of theme teaching argue that this approach helps children make meaning of their learning experiences as they “form connections among individual bits of information. These connections contribute to children’s concept development and are the most important reason for advocating a theme-oriented approach to teaching” (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 1999, p. 507).

As in project learning or the Reggio Emilia schools, themes permit children to focus deeply on a single topic over a period of time. In addition, themes that are developed in response to children’s interests keep them excited about learning. Thematic teaching has its dangers in that teachers may create activities whose connection to the theme is contrived, “cutesy,” or devoted to fun and games, a situation that can lead to shallow or misguided learning. Kostelnik and colleagues

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(1999) gave as an example the popular theme "letter of the week." Perhaps the teacher has chosen the letter G this week and is confident that the children are getting the connection as they use green paint at the easel, snack on grapes, and growl like lions. However:

In reality, the children may be focusing on the subject of their paintings rather than on the color, they may be thinking of grapes as fruit rather than a *g* word, and they may be more aware of the loudness or mock ferocity of their growling than the consonant sound they are making. Since *g* is not a concept and does not directly relate to children's real-life experiences, these are poor attempts at theme teaching, (p. 511)

Effective themes, according to Kostelnik and colleagues (1999) are those that relate to children's life experiences, represent a concept, are supported by a body of factual content, and lend themselves to possible development as projects (see the pre vious section entitled *Emergent Curriculum*).

Subject-Based, Discipline-Based, or Traditional Curriculum

Basing the curriculum on academic disciplines or subjects such as reading, language arts, math, science, social studies, art, music, and physical education leads to learning experiences that are created and controlled mainly by adults. This does not mean that they cannot be enjoyable and interesting to children. It, however, does place most decision-making power in the hands of the educators, with little room for input from those who do the actual learning. This approach is probably appropriate in a society with top-down power, but it is less helpful in a society that strives to raise citizens for democracy. At the early childhood level, one way to lead children toward democracy is to give them choices in their learning.

Additionally, dividing the curriculum by subject areas can be confusing to young children who are just becoming acquainted with the world and everything in it. When they explore a pond for the first time, they don't see it in terms of a science lesson but in relation to all its sensory delights. (Take a moment here to consider the possibilities of teaching something about the pond using every one of the subject areas listed in the preceding paragraph.)

Teachers of children in the primary grades of necessity, will need to concern themselves with teaching individual subjects. Helping children learn to read is, for most, the critical core of the curriculum. The content of children's reading is frequently divided according to predetermined textbooks in specified academic areas. To the extent that it is necessary to assist children in understanding this content according to the prescribed curriculum, teachers must comply. Wherever

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and whenever possible, it is recommended that children be provided choices and cross-curricular meaning through the other approaches we describe here.

Philosophically Prescribed Curriculum

Throughout the history of early education, there have been a number of philosophers, educators, and theorists who have observed young children, then prescribed curriculum they deemed most appropriate. Generally, these approaches have been an improvement on the early education of their time, have lasted until the next improvements emerged, and then have faded from sight, perhaps leaving behind a remnant or two.

One example of such a curriculum is that developed by Friedrich Froebel, the 19th-century German who created and named the *kindergarten* (German for children's garden). Children between the ages of 3 and 6 spent their days working in identically laid out gardens, participating in specially composed singing games, and interacting with materials designed to teach a series of specific skills. Although we no longer see kindergartens that look just like Froebel's, his influence lingers on in such activities as weaving with colored construction paper, sewing with yarn on cardboard, and in whole-class circle games.

A second example, still in existence, is the curriculum developed by Maria Montessori, an Italian doctor who was inspired, in part, by Froebel's materials. Observing and working with the same age children, she focused on creating curricula that permitted youngsters to advance in their learning to the greatest extent possible. Her learning materials were nearly as prescribed and rigid as Froebel's, but Montessori also was dedicated to creating citizens for democracy and thus built a variety of choices into the curricula and the teaching methods. Montessori schools still can be observed in many countries, including the United States, but her influence is felt in other learning sites as well. Cardboard cutout letters for creating simple words and phrases, mushroom-shaped tone bells, and metal templates for making geometric designs are examples of materials that have made their way to non-Montessori schools.

Pushed-Down and Watered-Down Curricula

These approaches to early childhood curriculum are two sides of the same coin. They seem to appear when parents, school systems, legislators, and other adults who hope to raise the educational performance of young children insist on a curriculum that is inappropriate for them. Typically, any or all of these adult groups decide that the children aren't learning enough for their age and then go about "fixing" the problem.

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It is entirely possible that the children in question could be learning more, but adults who have no background in child development and education tend to believe that the appropriate response is to push down to the earlier age group the curriculum of older children. Then, when it becomes apparent that the youngsters are having difficulties coping, the new curriculum is watered down to a (usually mind-numbing) basic level. If the children still have trouble coping, the blame is then placed on them or their teachers or both, rather than on the inappropriate curriculum that has come to fill their days.

One of the authors observed just such a situation in a state in which she previously lived. In this case, the adults providing the push were members of the state legislature, and the pushed-down curriculum was designated for grades K-3. She recalls walking down a school hallway one day when a first-grade teacher, apparently having just reached her breaking point, leaned out of her classroom and yelled, “We know better than to teach like this!” then disappeared into her classroom again. Over a period of 10 years, teachers, principals, and university educators managed to overturn the legislative mandates, and with a new state superintendent of schools, a new, developmentally appropriate curriculum was developed. By that time, unfortunately, many thousands of children had received curriculum that was inappropriate to their age.

About watering down the curriculum, a number of researchers and writers have noted that:

Such intellectually impoverished curriculum underestimates the true competence of children, which has been demonstrated to be much higher than is often assumed. Watered-down, oversimplified curriculum leaves many children unchallenged, bored, uninterested, or unmotivated. In such situations, children’s experiences are marked by a great many missed opportunities for learning. (Bredecamp & Copple, 1997, p. 20)

The pushed-down curriculum, on the other hand, creates other problems:

When next-grade expectations of mastery of basic skills are routinely pushed down to the previous grade and whole-group and teacher-led instruction is the dominant teaching strategy, children who cannot sit still and attend to teacher lectures or who are bored and unchallenged or frustrated by doing workbook pages for long periods of time are mislabeled as immature, disruptive, or unready for school. (Bredecamp & Copple, 1997, p. 20)

Individualized Educational Plans

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Preschool and primary children who are eligible for special education services have a portion of their curriculum identified by their Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). The IEP contains goals and objectives developed to address the individual learning needs of each eligible child. The IEP usually addresses more specific curriculum objectives in the same content areas as the regular classroom curriculum. IEP goals and objectives for preschool children usually are written in specific developmental areas such as motor, cognitive, language, and social domains. School-age children are more likely to have goals and objectives for specific subject areas. The most common goals and objectives on IEPs are in the areas of cognition and communication for preschoolers and in reading for primary school students.

The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is used for infants and toddlers who qualify for early intervention services and includes developmental goals for children as well as family-centered goals. School districts that serve infants and toddlers in special education programs generally address only the developmental goals for children on IFSPs.

A Few Curricular Approaches to Avoid

In amusing language, Jones and Nimmo (1994) described some things that can go wrong with an early childhood curriculum, even at times, with the best of intentions.

• *The canned curriculum.* This often comes from a district or state and is designed to be teacher-proof. Unfortunately, it can't possibly fit every child, and alteration is not an option.

• *The enbalmed curriculum.* The teacher who has taught many years can be guilty of using this curriculum. The materials are old, perhaps faded and tattered, and practically can be taught in one's sleep. No regard is paid to the fact that the current year's children may be vastly different from those in previous years, that new content may be available, or that teaching in one's sleep may not be advantageous either to teacher or to children.

• *The accidental or unidentified curriculum.* For teachers who are content just to hang out with children, hope that learning will result from free play, and put no time or energy into planning, this is the curriculum that results. Typically, there are lots of good starting points, even interesting activities, but they never go anywhere or have any particular identity.

Curriculum-Based Assessment

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Also called classroom-based assessment, curriculum-based assessment refers to procedures that teachers use to identify curriculum goals and objectives (assessment) and to monitor progress toward learning goals after teaching has occurred (evaluation). Curriculum-based assessment is tied directly to the curriculum content of the classroom and is a critical component of educational reform efforts that have produced specific grade level learning standards. The standards for each grade level form the framework for curriculum content, and classroom-based assessment and evaluation provide the mechanism for accountability that students are (or are not) meeting the academic standards set forth.

Curriculum-based assessment should not be confused with achievement testing or standardized testing. Curriculum-based assessment evaluates a child's learning against the classroom curriculum, whereas *standardized testing* compares a child's performance to the mean performance of a large group of same age peers. The use of standardized assessments with young children has been criticized roundly because the procedures for testing are not appropriate for young children, and the content of the assessments often has little or nothing to do with the content of classroom instruction. Curriculum-based assessment, on the other hand, is closely associated with children's learning and should be considered an important component of the teaching process.

NAEYC Curriculum Guidelines

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has devoted much of its energy to determining appropriate curriculum for youngsters' learning from birth to age 8. Beginning in 1987, they published position statements as a response to their concern with the nationally widespread trend toward pushed-down and watered-down curricula. Much progress has been made in the years since, but problems persist, because inappropriate curricula continue to be demanded by legislatures, requested by parents, and practiced by some caregivers and teachers.

There is an important underlying theme to the NAEYC's position on curriculum creation, and it reflects current opinion, observation, and research. It is that "in some respects, the curriculum strategies of many teachers today do not demand enough of children and in other ways demand too much of the wrong thing" (Bredecamp & Copple, 1997, p. 20). In other words, we have discovered in recent years that young children are capable of much more than we ever thought (e.g., self-direction, research using the scientific method), but we often inappropriately superimpose adult expectations on them (hours spent alone at desks, piles of worksheets). As you contemplate and design curriculum, keep in mind the following nine guidelines as well as the underlying theme just described.

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