

## LET US TAKE A JOURNEY TOGETHER: AN EXPLORATION OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND CURRICULUM APPROACHES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

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### **Abstract**

Variations among curriculum approaches reflect differences in values concerning what is more or less important for young children to learn, as well as in the process by which children are believed to learn and develop. These variations inform the role of teachers, the curriculum's focus, the classroom structure, and the ways in which children participate in learning. Some curriculum models are highly structured and provide detailed scripts for teacher's behaviours. Others emphasize guiding principles and expect teachers to determine how best to implement these principles. Curriculum approaches, regardless of their goals and the degree of flexibility in their implementation, however, are designed to promote uniformity across early childhood programmes through the use of a prepared curriculum, consistent instructional techniques for effective teaching and predictable child outcomes. This paper therefore is to remind society to slow down on the programmes and curriculum to which children are exposed and not to rush children because children have the right to be children.

### **Introduction**

Over the years, the meaning of curriculum has not changed much. Curriculum is knowledge that educators are to teach. Included in this body of knowledge are content areas, skills, and lessons. Curriculum is the learning experiences that a learner goes through in school (Tanner, 1980). A more recent definition of curriculum is that it is a written plan of goals for children's learning and development (Bredenkamp, 2011). Curriculum also includes learning experiences, materials, and teaching strategies that help children acquire learning goals. Curriculum is the what—the content that children learn, while teaching is the “how” in curriculum. The goal of curriculum is to transfer “the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (or attitudes and approaches toward learning)” (Bredenkamp, 2011, p.299).

Curriculum can be teacher-developed, locally developed, research-based, and published. Teacher-developed curriculum is when teachers write up lesson plans for the curriculum—preschools and child care centers use teacher-developed curriculum (Bredenkamp, 2011). A curriculum specialist would develop a plan for teachers to follow to achieve the school's

learning goals. Research based curriculum is curriculum that is research-based—it has been proven to produce desired learning outcomes.

### ***Children as Unique Learners***

Children are unique and learn differently (Bredekamp, 2011). According to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence, there are different areas that children learn. For example, some children are kinesthetic learners where they learn best when doing hands-on activities. Some children have logical/mathematical skills, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills, etc. Even as adults, everyone thinks differently. As children become adults, everyone learns and thinks different and will approach problems using different strategies while reaching the same answer. According to John Dewey, children learn best by doing. It is the teacher's role to provide opportunities and influences that will help children learn and teachers are not to impose ideas on children. Play and discovery learning are some of the ways that children learn. Piaget would argue that children learn through play. Children construct their own knowledge by engaging in the environment. Given that children have multiple intelligences and children learn by constructing their own knowledge, teachers can encourage children's intellectual dispositions by instilling a desire to learn, think critically, and be eager to learn. Jalongo (2011) states that the child is both shaped by the environment and shapes the environment - this is known as cognitive developmental theory. Children go through stages when their language is developing. Cognitive developmental theory develops from constructivism. Using the premise from constructivism, children do not absorb the language in their environment, but they actively build and construct their knowledge around them (Jalongo, 2011). According to Vygotsky, it is the responsibility of teachers to help children reach Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), The Zone of Proximal Development is the gap between what a learner has already mastered (the actual level of development) and what he or she can achieve when provided with educational support (potential development) (Saito, 2011).

### ***Child-initiated Learning or Teacher-directed Learning?***

According to Saltman (2012), learning needs to be shifted from the role of teachers to the role of children. Children are more interested in their own learning when they are given autonomy of their own learning (Saltman, 2012). When children are given challenging school work, they can use critical-thinking skills more readily. Children are naturally active learners who set goals and make choices to solve problems. In fact, even being able to make from two different homework assignments can help students be more engaged. Part of SDL learning is that it gives children to opportunity to make decisions. The focus on student-directed learning helps children foster their critical and creative thinking skills. To help children achieve higher level thinking skills, it is important to teach them to question their own world (Saltman, 2012).

In Schweinhart and Weikart's (2002) study, they wanted to find out if curriculum should be child-initiated or teacher-directed learning or if both should be considered. To answer their question, they used three preschool curriculum models: direct instruction, High/Scope, and the traditional nursery school. Direct instruction is when the teacher directs the lessons and

presents the information to students, and children respond to the activities. Academic goals are clearly addressed by the teacher. In High/Scope, the teacher and students plan the curriculum activities and work together. Activities are part of the plan-do-review process where children get to plan their activities and review what they did afterwards. The activities are meant to promote students' social, physical, and intellectual development. In the traditional nursery school, children initiate their own activities, and teachers respond to them. Children are encouraged to engage in free play. Teachers create classroom themes that are based on everyday events (Schweinhart and Weikart, 2002). In their study, they followed 68 young people born in poverty and who were randomly assigned to a curriculum model. Schweinhart and Weikart (2002) found that 6 percent of High/Scope or the Nursery School needed treatment for emotional impairment/disturbance. In comparison, 47 percent of the people in the directed instruction group needed treatment for emotional impairment/disturbance. According to Schweinhart and Weikart (2002), the direct instruction group left "negative emotional residue" on the group. People from the High/Scope and Nursery School were engaged in more volunteer work (44 percent) as opposed to the direct instruction group (11 percent). From this study, Schweinhart and Weikart (2002) concluded that child-initiated activities focus on children's development, whereas direct instruction focus primarily on academics (p.59). As educators, we can use Schweinhart and Weikart's findings to create curriculum that is hands-on. Early childhood education should not only be focused on academics but it should also teach children to make their own decisions, solve problems, and interact with others (Schweinhart & Weikart, 2002).

Dewey believed that children learn best by doing. Barbour (2012) states that what I hear I forget, what I see I remember, what I do and I understand, this reflects Dewey's view that children learn best when they are actively engaged and by participating in the learning process. According to Howard Gardner's theory, children learn differently and as a result have different approaches to doing things. The Gardner's multiple intelligences theory is a useful framework to understand the variation in children's learning. Instead of viewing as only one single way of learning, Gardner came up with eight intelligences: local/mathematical, linguistic, musical, naturalist, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner wants teachers to be able to understand that children can be intelligent in many different ways (Bredekamp, 2011). The schools today often only focus on two intelligences: logical/mathematical and linguistic intelligence. Standardized tests and college entrance exams focus on logical/mathematical and linguistic intelligence as well. When children are only tested in these areas, other intelligences are ignored. Gardner believed that the achievement gap for children of low-income and children of color can be narrowed, if teachers paid attention to the full range of children's intelligences (Bredekamp, 2011).

### ***Personalized Learning and Play Methods***

One approach that focuses on children's multiple intelligences is personalized learning. Demski (2012) states that educators are aware that learning is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Educators are now seeking project based learning, addressing multiple learning styles, and implementing collaborative learning among children. Demski (2012) introduces personalized

learning, where learning is student-centered, students' multiple intelligences, experiences, needs, and interests are acknowledged. Personalized learning is not individualized learning, where they learn at their own pace. At the same time, personalized learning is not differentiated learning where they receive instruction according to their learning needs (Demski, 2012). According to US Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology, personalized learning is "an instructional approach that encompasses both differentiation and individualization, but is also flexible in content or theme to match the specific interests and prior experiences of learners" (Demski, 2012, p.34). Personalized learning takes into account children's prior knowledge and interests and uses them to add value to their learning. In personalized learning, there is a strong emphasis on parent involvement, more one-on-one interactions between student and teacher, attention to different learning styles, technology, varied learning environment, and choices in the curriculum (Demski, 2012, p.34). Technology is a way to offer a more personalized learning for children. Students are the central part of personalized learning. Students have access to technology, where they have access to communication tools, information and data, personal learning tools, etc. Technology allows for students to take more ownership of their own learning and personalize their learning.

In addition to Gardner's multiple intelligences, Piaget would argue that children learn best when they are engaged in play. According to Lillard (2013), free play is when one engages in object play, pretend/sociodramatic play, and rough play. Free play is voluntary, naturally fun, and does not need extrinsic rewards. Playful learning focuses on the child, is hands-on, involves constructive learning, and is affectively positive. Play is intrinsically motivating and fun and children are engaged when playing. During play, children are given the opportunity to explore their environment, experiment, and discover new things. Bredekamp (2011) states that during play, children are also interacting with others which allows them to develop their language skills. Saito (2011) states that when lessons are turned into games, children will be more engaged and be able to learn. As a teacher, I have observed how my students are actively engaged when my math and English language arts lessons are turned into game. For example, to help my students review for a Vocabulary quiz, I turned it into a Jeopardy Vocabulary game—all of the students were engaged and working together during the activity.

Some environmental considerations to consider is that given that children learn best by exploring, it is our responsibility as educators to set the environment for children. Vygotsky believed that a child's social and cultural environment affects children's learning. A child's cognitive development cannot be separated from social contexts; a child's culture is part of his or her development. Vygotsky believed that language developmental was embedded in a child's social environment. When a child socializes with other, the child is given the opportunity to foster their language development. Stuft and Brogadir would add that teachers need to get to know the child's family culture. By getting to know a child's culture, teachers can make their lessons culturally and personally relevant to a child's life. The Family Systems Theory is also needed when considering a child's culture. The Family Systems

theory allows educators to understand a family's culture and understand why families are the way they are.

According to Elkind, play is a counteract of hurrying (Paciorek, 1999). Elkind also addressed his concern about music, art, and drama being removed from school classes. There is also a lack of opportunities for children to play. Elkind states that play is beneficial for children because it allows them to learn social rules and basic concepts. Play is also a way for children to deal with stress. According to Hughes (2010), play is beneficial to children's intellectual development. For example, Vygotsky state that play materials help children distinguish from actual objects to representations of objects. McCarthy's Scales of Children's Abilities found that toys with different functions contributed to children's cognitive growth. Play also gives children to opportunity to problem-solve (Hughes, 2010). Hughes (2010) states that children need to have convergent and divergent problem solving skills, therefore children need to be exposed to materials that requires them to use these skills.

Another beneficial aspect of play is found in social play. "Social play is characterized by nonliteral behaviors" (Hughes, 2010). Social play is beneficial because it allows children to focus on rules. Children do not only focus on the rules, but they also focus on the social interactions with other children.

### ***Teachers as Facilitators, Researchers and Reflective Practitioners***

In the Reggio Emilia approach, the role of the teacher is to be a collaborator and co-learner (Hewett, 2001). Teachers are considered partners in the process of the children's learning. Malaguzzi used a metaphor to describe the two-way direction that instruction travels. Malaguzzi state that in ping pong, both players are required to do their part and make adjustments in order to optimize their growth. A single person/player is not able to participate on their own. Both child and the teacher engage in collaborative learning. Even though a teacher's role is to be a collaborator and co-learner, the teacher also acts as a facilitator. As a facilitator, the teacher provides children with the right tools to learn. Hewett (2001) state that the teacher's role as a facilitator aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development where teachers scaffold children's knowledge. In the same way, Malaguzzi state that teachers should find situations where children are about to see what adults are able to see. In other words, teachers are to help children reach their zone of proximal development. Teachers also take on the role as a researcher as they help facilitate children's questions, curiosity, and understanding (Hewett, 2001). By observing children and collecting data about what the children know, the teachers acquires knowledge about the children's learning and development (Hewett, 2001). Teachers also collect documentation of children's learning by using videos, audio recording, and photographs of children engaged in the work. Teacher reflection is an integral part of teaching. It is important for teachers to question their own teaching practices so that they can grow.

When it comes to teacher-child interactions, constructivists would argue that teachers act as facilitators. Dewey, would argue that teachers do not impose ideas on children but rather provide opportunities for children to learn. When using a constructivist approach, children construct their own learning where teacher-directed lessons are not as prevalent. Lessons are

### ***Framework for different Curriculum Models and Approaches***

The High/Scope curriculum was developed by Dave Weikart (Bredekamp, 2011). Another curriculum that gives students autonomy and control of their own learning is Weikart's High Scope curriculum. The High/Scope curriculum emerged from the Perry Preschool Project. One of the elements of High Scope is the Plan, Do, Review. This process is about 60-90 minutes long where children plan what they are going to play/do, children will then do the activity, and then write about what they did (Bredekamp, 2011). High Scope focuses on the active participation of children by giving them the opportunity to "initiate, discover, experience, and learn" (p.321).

The curriculum involves hands-on activities that are used to build children's social-emotional development, language development, and literacy skills. The High Scope curriculum is based on Piagetian constructivist principles. The roots from High Scope comes from a constructivist theory. Constructivists believe that we learn through our physical and social environment. The goal of High Scope is more about a child's readiness to learn than direct instruction of objectives. High Scope is a validated curriculum meaning that it has shown lasting effects on children's school and future life. High Scope recognizes that children need to be able to actively explore and engage in hands-on learning with people, ideas, and objects (Bredekamp, 2011). Many educators believe that High Scope has also demonstrated long term effects in preschool programs. The four guiding principles in High Scope are: Engaging students through their interactions with people, materials, and events; children should be involved in the planning process focusing on activities that are intentional; curriculum needs to contain a variety of learning experiences that is appropriate.

One curriculum that takes into consideration that children learn best by doing is the Project Based Approach. Project based approach is where students apply what they learn by doing projects that work with real life situations and problems—these projects consist of dioramas, experiments, using technology, etc. When project based approach is implemented well, children are motivated to learn and are able to apply what they learn to real life situations. Hertzog (2007) states that project based approach learning connects students' interests to their learning. Project based approach allows children to investigate topics that are meaningful to them and allows them to think critically and creatively. Children find answers to their own questions, analyze and interpret their data, and share their results with others. According to Katz and Chard, there are three phases in the Project Approach. In Phase I, students use their prior experiences and memories to examine what they know or do not know about the topic. Stage II is the inquiry phase where children find answers to the questions by engaging in field work and collect data in multiple ways. Phase III is the sharing portion where children share their findings with parents, teachers, classmates, etc. Student work are represented in many ways: open houses, poems, songs, role-playing, books, drawings, or three-dimensional models (Hertzog, 2007). Children learn more effectively when they learn skills from meaningful activities versus rote memory and drill practice.

The Project Approach aligns with John Dewey's progressive education—child-centered education. Dewey believed that a child's education experience should match their interests

and guided by the teacher. The traditional approach, according to Dewey, is not child-centered. The traditional approach uses a uniform curriculum and method (Hertzog, 2007). The Project Approach calls for children's active participation in developing, planning, and assessing their work. The project approach enhances children's dispositions—these dispositions are the desire to learn, think critically, and be eager to learn. Children who were in child-centered programs tends to have less social problems than children in structuralized academic programs (Hertzog, 2007). Katz and Chart state that it is better to use a more informal curriculum/learning environment because teachers have more access to children's understandings, misunderstandings, and representations. Within the project approach, students are encouraged to work in their interest areas and develop new interests. Hertzog (2007) states that teachers have spoken positively about the behaviors they have observed when students were engaged in their work. Students who were usually not engaged in their work were more engaged when they were engaging in activities that were meaningful to them. When children are given control of their own learning, they are able to take ownership of their own learning.

In Lucy Mitchell's Bank Street Approach, field trips and projects are the basic highlights of the curriculum. Mitchell believed in giving children the opportunity to explore their environment. Her views were similar to that of Dewey and Piaget. According to Bredekamp (2011), the Bank Street Approach played important roles in the history of early childhood education. Mitchell's educational philosophy emphasized children's first hand experiences—her ideas became known as the Bank Street Approach. Children's experiences are focused on the "here and now." Their experiences include field trips and projects that widen their "here and now" horizons. The Bank Street Approach focuses on the whole child—social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. The curriculum is grounded in social studies and comes from observations of children playing.

The Reggio Emilia Approach developed by Malaguzzi is student-centered. Reggio Emilio approach is an example of an emergent curriculum. There is no pre-set curriculum. Instead, the curriculum is based on what the students' interests are. The curriculum changes as students' interests change. The Reggio Emilia approach was developed after World War II in the village of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The pacing of Reggio Emilia is self-paced and it focuses on hands-on learning. The approach allows children to use all of their senses to explore the world and communicate through music, art, movement, and language (Bredekamp, 2011). The Reggio Emilia is not a curriculum, but rather it integrates several theories and expands on each theory. There are elements of Vygotskian theory in Reggio Emilia. For example, children engage in collaborated group work. Knowledge is constructed between teachers and children. Children's learning is scaffolded where teachers will act as facilitators and guide students in their learning. Reggio Emilia views the children as strong, powerful, and with a lot of potential. Children have their own rights as citizens and are contributing members of the community (Bredekamp, 2011).

In Reggio, children with special needs are called children with special rights instead of viewing them as having needs, they are seen as having rights. Children are viewed as

beautiful, creative, curious, powerful and competent (Hewett, 2001). They are given priority to enroll in schools. Emphasis is placed on listening to the child because their thoughts and work are respected and taken seriously. Children are also viewed as the protagonist in their learning because they have the primary role in their own learning. Children work alongside others discovering and constructing their own questions and answers. Learning is something a child does instead of doing something to a child. Reggio Emilia reflects Piaget's study on constructivism where learning is active (Hewett, 2001). Children's active interaction with the environment helps them construct their knowledge. Piaget said that children who learn freely through "investigation and spontaneous effort will later be able to retain it" (Hewett, 2001, p.96). Within the Reggio Emilia approach, children are also viewed as investigators. Piaget viewed children as researchers while John Dewey state that "All thinking is research" (Hewett, 2001, p.96). Children get to explore, discover, discuss, and hypothesize in-depth studies or projects. Vygotsky's theories also play a role in the Reggio Emilia approach. According to Vygotsky, language and thought works together to "form ideas and to make a plan for action" (Hewett, 2001, p.97).

According to Malaguzzi, Reggio Emilia approach is based on relationships. Teachers will remain with the same group of kids for three years and they will focus on reciprocating relationships among children and the community (Bredekamp, 2011). Parents play a role in the Reggio Emilia approach. The Reggio Emilia approach is an approach that is based on relationships. Schools do not exist with parents, children, and teachers. In order for schools to operate, parent participation is necessary and parents need to be deeply involved with their children's learning. The environment in Reggio Emilia schools have been thoughtfully planned out. In the Reggio Emilia approach, teachers and children act as partners in children's learning. Teachers do not see themselves as experts but instead they view themselves as partners with children. Teachers act as a resource to children and teachers learn with children during the process. The Reggio Emilia approach does not involve a preset curriculum. The curriculum is based on children's interests—these interests are related to topics and/or questions children are interested in. Projects are a big part of the Reggio Emilia approach. Projects are based on children's interests.

Another curriculum approach is Montessori. The Montessori approach emphasizes on the link between the family and school. Maria Montessori believed that children develop naturally in an organized environment. Montessori believed in the active mind where children actively learn from their environment. She believed that children ages 4 to 7 do not need extrinsic rewards because they are intrinsically motivated to learn from their environment (Bredekamp, 2011). Montessori viewed play as a waste of time and she did not view social interaction with much importance. She also believe that children should be given a small mat to work on and should not be disturbed by others. Most Montessori centers have multiple age groups that is intended to let children learn from each other. Like Dewey, Maria Montessori also believed that children learn best by doing. She believed that teachers should act as facilitators, demonstrating how to use learning materials silently. Children can then use the materials that they observed how to use and work on it on their own on their mats.

The Montessori curriculum is based on sensory learning. Children learn more when they use their five senses: smell, touch, taste, hear, and see. Most of the learning materials are didactic—they are sensory materials and used for self-correcting. All of the learning materials were developed by Maria Montessori. The materials are aesthetically pleasing and sturdy. Montessori education is usually known as a form of playful learning even though Montessori viewed play as a waste of time (Lillard, 2013). In Montessori classrooms, blocks are not used. Instead, they use three specific types of blocks that Montessori developed to teach dimensions: the Pink Tower, the Brown Stair, and the Red Rods. Children learn to use these blocks in sequence. There is a correct way to use Montessori's materials and there is a specific time to use them in the curriculum. Montessori education is restrictive.

In Montessori schools, children are not allowed to play with materials that they were not taught how to use. Children are always given instruction on how to use the materials. In Montessori classrooms, children are not allowed to engage in unconstructive activities. Materials are used for a purpose and not simply for free unconstructive activities. Montessori education does not allow children to freely play with materials because the materials have a specific purpose. Free play will interfere with the purpose of the materials (Lillard, 2013). Another reason why using Montessori education is restrictive is because research has shown that children perform better when their environment is orderly. Montessori classrooms are orderly in the sense that all materials have a specific purpose—there is a right way to use the materials. Montessori education does allow for variation. If a teacher observes that a child's way of using a material is constructive, the teacher will allow the child to continue using the material in that way. If the activity is not constructive, the teacher will stop the child and teach the child the correct way to use the material. Extrinsic rewards are not used in Montessori schools (Lillard, 2013). There is no need for extrinsic rewards because learning is an intrinsic reward. According to Montessori, learning is the reward.

### ***An Exploration of Center-based and Differentiated Instruction***

Center-based instruction is an approach that focuses on creating a classroom environment that is appropriate for children (Aina, 2009). The approach focuses on children's developmental abilities, interests, and learning styles. The approach is an intentional strategy that seeks to provide active involvement of children as well as opportunities for experience-based learning (Aina, 2009). Having centers are part of center-based instruction. Children can work alone or in with others during centers. Children rotate within these centers, with each center focusing on one activity. According to Aina (2009), center-based instruction is effective because children are given the opportunity to be active learners where they get to "explore, experiment, and inquire" (Aina, 2009, p.56). It is necessary for children to be able to explore and ask questions in order for them to understand the world they live in. Children are more excited when they can independently discover and experiment things. Center-based instruction promotes children's autonomy of their own learning. Children develop autonomy during centers when they are active, learning at their own pace, making their own choices, when activities are student-directed, when children are responsible for their own learning and are given freedom within limits (Aina, 2009).

Differentiated instruction is given when some students struggle with learning and/or are beyond grade-level. Children learn in different ways and have different intelligences. Also in early childhood education, it is well-known that there is a wide range of learning styles. Often times, teachers assume that all children will acquire the same skills at the same time. This ignores the fact that children are individuals and that they learn at a different pace. Grading and standardized testing assume that children all learn the same skills at the same time. Bredekamp (2011) states that we can teach them the same learning goals but they need to be taught as individuals. The question of whether development is biology or environment is one of the most continuing debates. According to Jensen, people's behaviors are a result of inborn characteristics. For example, physical growth and motor skills are developed in a sequence. Development can also be affected by one's environment (nurture). For example, one's family, circle of friends, and one's community can affect one's development.

In order for effective teaching to occur, teachers need to understand each child's individual preferences, interests, background, and culture. In the Learning Cycle of Differentiated Instruction, teachers must first get to know the child. In addition, teachers need to know the curriculum. Knowing the child and knowing the curriculum will help teachers differentiate instruction. When teachers plan, they need to consider the environment, content, process of teaching, and assessment of learning.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a framework that is used to prevent children from failure in reading and mathematics. The RTI consists of three tiers. The first tier is research-based curriculum that is designed for all children—it generally meets the needs of 80% children. The second tier is focused instruction and an ongoing process of monitoring children that are not making expected progress. The third tier is intensive instructional intervention for children who needs intensive care. RTI is done to prevent delayed learning into learning disabilities (Bredekamp, 2011)

### **Conclusion**

Curriculum has multiple meanings. Some define curriculum as the experiences that one goes through while some define it as a formal course of study or as a learning plan. The way one would determine how to design curriculum is based on the individual and diverse learning styles of their children among several other factors. There are many curriculum approaches that address the diverse learning styles of children. Montessori education focuses on allowing children to actively engage in the environment and learn from hands-on activities. Montessori was not an advocate of play and believed that children need to be taught how to use the materials before using them. Many philosophers believe that children do not absorb knowledge. Instead, they construct their knowledge by interacting with the environment.

Elkind believed that in today's education system, children are hurried. Society is becoming more fast-paced. Parents are putting their children's development in high speed and as a result, children are missing out on events that only happen in childhood. Parents are rushing children to learn how to read and learn other academic skills. This paper is to remind society to slow down and to not rush children—children have the right to be children. One way to

counterbalance the high speed life for children is through play. Play allows children to have fun and engage in hands on activities. Forcing a child to read when they are not ready can be harmful to the child. Children should be challenged intellectually but the challenge should be constructive, not debilitating

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