

# Early Childhood Curriculum Models

## Why, What, and How Programs Use them

by Diane Trister Dodge

### The Changing Role of Curriculum

It wasn't so long ago that the idea of using a written curriculum to guide the care and education of children under five was not widely accepted. It was unheard of in programs serving infants and toddlers and still controversial for programs serving preschool children. Even defining curriculum for this age group has been challenging. Dictionaries typically define curriculum as a scope and sequence for a course of study. Organizations and experts on early childhood education provide broader definitions that address all aspects of program planning for a given age group, including content, processes, context, and what teachers do. An appropriate definition for World Forum participants comes from NAEYC's new position paper on curriculum assessment and evaluation, which states that ". . . in general curriculum is seen as the means by which a society helps learners acquire the knowledge, skills, and values that that society deems most worth having."

New research and knowledge highlight the importance of the early childhood years in preparing children, especially vulnerable children, for school and

future success. Because high quality early learning experiences are so important, they cannot be left to chance. There is a growing consensus, supported by many scholarly reports, that we must be more purposeful in our work with young children. A comprehensive curriculum can help teachers and directors make thoughtful decisions about how and what to teach. It provides a blueprint for planning and implementing a program that addresses all aspects of child development and building partnerships with families.

At the same time, content standards for different disciplines — literacy, math, science, social studies, the arts,

and technology — are giving us a better understanding of what experiences lay a firm foundation for life-long learning and healthy development. These standards are used to build curriculum content that is challenging and relevant to what children will be learning when they enter school. It is safe to say that ". . . much more has become known about the power of high-quality cur-

High interest in the topic of curriculum at the World Forum reflects the changing role of curriculum in programs throughout the world that provide care and education for children from birth through age five. This article is an outgrowth of the curriculum track in Acapulco where different models were presented and where panel members and participants explored topics related to the ongoing implementation of a curriculum.

As a follow-up to the three well-attended sessions at the recent World Forum, programs around the globe were asked to respond to questions about whether they use a particular curriculum model, what distinguishes their curriculum, and how they help teachers learn about and implement their curriculum. We received approximately 80 enthusiastic and varied responses — far too extensive to do justice in one short article to the many thoughtful ideas that were shared. This article attempts to highlight some of the important issues involved with the selection and use of a curriculum. For those who wish to read more, the *Child Care Information Exchange* web site — [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) — will provide access to the descriptions that were sent. In this way, we hope to keep the conversation alive and inclusive.

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of early childhood programs by designing practical, easy-to-use curriculum and training materials and providing staff development. She has been a preschool and kindergarten teacher, served as the education coordinator for Head Start and child care programs in Mississippi and Washington, DC, and directed national projects in education and human services. Diane is a well-known speaker and author of more than 25 books, including *The Creative Curriculum*, *Building the Primary Classroom*, and books for parents. She has served on numerous boards, including NAEYC and the Center for the Child Care Workforce.

riculum content, effective assessment practices, and ongoing program evaluation as tools to support better outcomes for young children.”

## Why Programs Use a Curriculum

Programs are more likely to use a curriculum if they are required to do so or because they want to ensure that everyone is on the *same page* and working toward the same goals. In the United States, programs that receive federal or state funds are often required to identify a curriculum model that they are implementing. The National Head Start Bureau, for example, provides criteria for selecting a comprehensive curriculum model but gives each program the freedom to select the one that they think is most appropriate for the population they serve. Some states that oversee early childhood programs have approved specific curriculum models that programs may use. Privately funded preschool and child care programs have no specific requirements, although many do use a curriculum to guide their planning. They are more likely to have a curriculum if they are seeking accreditation, because that is a requirement.

With the increasing interest in preschool education, states are now required to develop standards for pre-K programs. As of 2002, 39 states had developed or were in the process of developing standards defining what children should know and be able to do before they enter kindergarten. These standards are increasingly being used to guide curriculum selection and planning.

In many countries, early childhood programs follow a specific curriculum framework, but they have a great deal of leeway in designing experiences that reflect their children and the community. For example, in New Zealand, early childhood centers use a curriculum framework called “Te Whariki,” mean-

ing “a woven mat.” It defines four principles — family and community, relationships, holistic development, and empowerment — and five strands — well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration. Each center creates its own “woven mat” from the basic principles and guidelines of the framework. (Nikki Grazier)

Similarly, in South Australia, there is a set curriculum framework called the “South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework,” that is used statewide as a framework for all programs. It outlines essential learnings: Futures, Identity, Interdependence, Communication, and Thinking. It is very flexible and allows for teachers to plan based on what they learn about their children. (Mary Scales)

In Kenya, all programs must follow national “Guidelines for Early Childhood Development” that describe objectives, content, and methods and recommend a thematic integrated approach. “Due to the diverse nature of Kenya’s people, culture, and environment . . . teachers are encouraged to use a localized curriculum which is developed for each district by the district centres for early childhood education.” (H. K. Manani)

## Curriculum Models That Programs Are Using

In the United States, most directors who responded to this survey identified a core, comprehensive curriculum that they use. The two most commonly mentioned are *The Creative Curriculum* and *High/Scope*. Directors also listed a wide variety of additional models and resources they use to supplement their planning. Ones that were mentioned more than once include the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and what several called “emergent curriculum.”

Criteria that programs use to select a curriculum or curriculum resources include:

- clearly written
- allows teachers to design a program that is responsive to individual and group needs and characteristics
- contains a parent involvement component
- addresses outcomes and states expectations
- consistent with the needs of the community.

It is interesting to note that educators who responded to the *Child Care Information Exchange* request, like those who attended the sessions at the World Forum, have strong beliefs about the importance of an approach to curriculum that gives teachers a vital role in constructing curriculum that is responsive to the children they teach. They reject prescriptive curriculum approaches that tell teachers what to teach, how to teach it, and when. “It is far easier to hand out ‘what to do today’ instructions, but then we miss the very essence of education for and about the child.” (Salynn McCollum)

It is not surprising, therefore, that a vast majority of responders either have developed their own curriculum or meld a variety of approaches. People talked about the great diversity in their countries and the value of allowing teachers and districts to respond to the people and the community they serve.

“Our curriculum is distinguished from other curriculum models in the way that it is original and not borrowed from any country or school but is based on strong educational philosophies — Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Steiner, Glendoman, Reggio Emilia, Vygotsky. In a nutshell, our curriculum has the qualities of a strong rubber band! It can stretch to encompass all kinds of cultural and other areas and age-specific needs of children, teachers, and

parents.” (Swati Popat, Podar Jumbo Kids, India)

## How Programs Use Curriculum Models

All programs that use a particular curriculum — whether adopted or developed by the programs — offer orientation to its approach and ongoing training and support for teachers. The curriculum thus becomes the focus for ongoing professional development experiences, often planned and conducted by the director of the program. Directors may bring in a consultant to provide an orientation to the curriculum; and they attend training themselves, so they can provide ongoing support to the teachers. They use a variety of strategies to support teachers in using and planning their curriculum:

- workshops and courses at local colleges
- team planning on weekly activities and to reflect on children’s work and conversations
- monthly staff meetings to discuss specific aspects of the curriculum
- self-instructional modules
- coaching and mentoring by more experienced teachers
- observing other teachers
- study groups on curriculum-related topics chosen by the staff
- sending teachers to conferences and seminars to get new ideas
- maintaining a resource library with books, videos, manuals, articles
- technology: conference calls, company web site threaded discussion groups, Internet training.

Not all staff development experiences are directly related to learning about and planning curriculum. One director, for example, uses the Staff Development Day to take her teachers to art galleries and museums so they can understand art in more depth. (Tamar Jacobson, Buffalo, NY)

Almost everyone who responded emphasized the importance of respecting teachers as curriculum designers. They described how their teachers observed children, documented what they learned, communicated regularly with families, and constructed their curriculum. The following statement captures this idea:

“When teachers build curriculum with each other and with the children and are willing to really listen to each other and to the children’s ideas, and really value them, there is a very different kind of relationship being established and a climate of mutual trust is formed. The nature of this relationship between teachers and children and parents would be very different in our opinion, if the teacher’s plan were already written and all the planning spaces filled in, and all the outcomes predetermined and articulated ahead of time.”

(Alba DiBello, Lincroft, NJ)

## Questions Directors Ask When Considering Curriculum Models

In making decisions about appropriate approaches, curriculum models, and resources, directors must first consider their specific program situations. This includes examining:

- the vision/mission of the program
- the philosophical beliefs held by the program (e.g., about how children learn best, how teachers grow professionally, the role of families as partners in children’s development and learning)
- mandates/requirements the program must meet (e.g., outcomes, standards)
- the experience and stability of the staff (e.g., their ability to develop meaningful curriculum, the guidance and training they will need)
- time that can be allocated for staff

development (e.g., time for teachers to meet together, share what they have learned about the children, and engage in joint planning of curriculum)

- resources available to support curriculum implementation (e.g., for materials, staff development).

After carefully examining the program’s circumstances and beliefs, directors may want to involve staff and families in the curriculum adoption process. Here are some questions to consider:

- Does the curriculum fit our beliefs, interests, and goals?
- Is it based on research?
- Is it easy to understand?
- Is it a comprehensive curriculum that sets out the basic information and guidance for putting a program in place, or a framework that allows teachers to create the curriculum?
- Is there evidence of the curriculum’s effectiveness when implemented well?
- Are resources available to support staff in implementing the curriculum (e.g., trainer’s guides, videos, parent resources)?
- Does it contain tools to determine how well the curriculum is being implemented (e.g., an implementation checklist that can be used by teachers and administrators)?

## Conclusion

Directors and teachers make decisions about curriculum every day. With the increasing recognition of the importance of early experiences in building a firm foundation for learning and development, and with the pressures on programs to produce results quickly, new approaches and resources are being pushed on programs. Participants at the World Forum curriculum sessions, and the vast majority of people who responded to this inquiry, are clearly skeptical of prescriptive approaches that do not recognize or value the role that

teachers, children, and families can play in developing meaningful curriculum reflective of each community. As Doug Clements (Buffalo, NY) tells us, "Curriculum does not stand apart from teachers. Teachers' knowledge, theories, and belief systems influence their instructional plans, decisions, and actions, including their implementation of curricula."

This creative, respectful approach to planning curriculum has value far beyond what happens in the classroom, as beautifully illustrated in classrooms inspired by Reggio Emilia where "teachers, parents, and children work together each day to build the kind of community in which they want to live." (Carla Rinaldi, Italy)

## References

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*Ibid.* p. 7.

# Buyer's Guide to Curriculum

This directory is a partial listing of companies providing curriculum products and services. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by *Child Care Information Exchange*. To request free information from these companies, visit [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or circle the number for each company of interest on the Product Inquiry Card located between pages 56 and 57.

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