

Appropriate and Inappropriate Curriculum for Young Children

By Alan M. Weber

A good place to start, it would seem, would be by defining “curriculum.” To some, the curriculum is a set of the teacher’s lessons. However, there are two problems with this perspective. First, we really do not do, or *should* not do, “lessons” as such with young children. When we think of a lesson, we most often see it as a demonstration, a lecture... a presentation of some sort. But young children do not learn by watching or listening, copying or memorizing; they learn by doing, by exploring, by testing, by playing, by acting and interacting. Young children, it is known, remember twenty percent of what they are told and eighty percent of what they do. A curriculum for young children should not be one of lessons, but of *activities* and *experiences* and *initiations*. The other problem is the presumption that the curriculum does and must come from the teacher. Certainly, teacher planned activities are a crucial component of an early childhood curriculum, assuming they are appropriately conceived and carried through. But what of child initiated activities, so-called “teachable moments,” the relationships we have with the children, and they with each other, what happens on the way to school and on the way home and *at* home and in the neighborhood and in the world? This kind of living curriculum, which is sometimes referred to as an “emergent curriculum,” is really everything that happens that affects children’s learning, facilitated and integrated personally and meaningfully, as needed, by a teacher who is not controlling or arbitrary in this process.

This leads to the second question: Where does the curriculum come from? Traditionally, curriculum is seen as akin to the stone tablets, passed down to us by some administrator, board, agency or company. And, unfortunately, sometimes, despite our best intentions and efforts, we cannot avoid that being at least partially so. In such cases, it is important, though, to remember that we can always do *something*, from necessary compromise to creative modification to closing our doors and doing what we think is right. But if the question truly involves *appropriate* curriculum, then the answer is that the curriculum comes from the children. Essentially, it comes from six places. First is children’s needs. As we observe and listen to and develop relationships with children, we become knowledgeable about their individual needs. Addressing them is not somehow apart from the curriculum, it is at its heart. We plan for individual children, which is one of the things that makes appropriate planning so time consuming and difficult. This does not mean that these activities would be just for them; they very well would be available to other children, who might use them in similar ways and for similar purposes or who might, based on who they are and what they need, approach them very differently. Second is children’s interests. We want children to care about things. Being interested can be a powerful vaccination against the boring, impersonal and inappropriate schooling they will likely have to confront at times later. Rather than being numbed or alienated, it could drive them to opening up a book, turning on the computer, going to the library or visiting a museum to pursue their interests and set their course. We want to build on and expand their interests, exposing them to other things they can care about. We want to use their interests, to get, through them, to their weaknesses and needs, as in the classic case

of the grade school child who is struggling with reading but loves baseball, so his teacher brings in baseball cards and magazines. We want learning to be based on curiosity, on motivation, on personal connection, and it really must be if it is to be effective, especially in the long term.

Third we have children's ideas. It is important that children be part of the planning process, informally and formally. Informally, we should be basing our activities on what we have observed children playing and exploring, discussing and asking about. Formally, we can have meetings wherein children provide ideas for curriculum directions. This sort of "child-centered curriculum" is what will encourage not only children's involvement but their self-confidence and initiative as well. Fourth there is children's experiences. In order for children to be able to understand and relate to a particular concept, s/he must have had concrete experience with it. So we start from where children are, from their lives and worlds, with what they know and are comfortable with. Children have had experiences, of course, with self, and with family, with feelings, with socializing, with growth, etc. These will form the cornerstones of the curriculum, as they are the most relevant and meaningful places to begin our explorations. But it is certainly reasonable that we might want to expose them to things beyond their immediate and past experiences, things like nature, the community, diversity of people and basic concepts of color, shape, number and such. If we are to do so, it is our responsibility to provide personal, concrete experiences for them to build their knowledge from. We cannot expect children to talk about, draw or understand things that they have not been able to see, touch, manipulate and test. According to Jean Piaget, learning is internally constructed, one block of knowledge at a time, so that ultimately the child has created a structure of the world that matches the external reality. Each new bit of information must have a foundation and a connection within the child, something s/he already understands and is comfortable with, something s/he can latch onto and build on.

So, we start with what they have already experienced and have begun to know, and then where we want to take them broader or deeper, we provide the concrete opportunities for discovery through which we can take them there. A teacher of young children, understanding how much stress children these days are under and wanting to help them learn to relax and let go, decided on a yoga-visualization like exercise. She asked her children to close their eyes with her (risky in itself) and imagine themselves at the beach, describing the feel of the sand, the sound of the waves, the absence of cares, etc. Upon opening her eyes, it was clear that the exercise was not working. And why... because few of them had been to the beach. So they planned a short trip to the beach, to experience its various aspects, then tried it again, and it worked much better.

Traditionally, early childhood teachers are a bit obsessed with farm animals. This is not meant as reflecting some kind of fetish, but "the cow goes moo, the sheep goes baa, the horse goes neigh, the duck goes quack, etc.," is quite often the be all and end all of classroom study. This is not to say that such a theme cannot be valuable and fun, only that it can be somewhat secondary in importance and relevance. In doing this theme, most commonly teachers rely on "Old McDonald," "The Farmer in the Dell," farm animal "See-N-Say's" and such, perhaps doing some vegetable planting, butter churning or egg scrambling, and some role playing. All of this is done in anticipation and preparation for the trip to an actual farm at the week's end. So what's wrong with this picture? Well, it's backwards. How the animals sound, the relevance of the milk and

eggs, the connection to the crops, the farmer's roles, etc. would only make sense to the children once they *had* taken the trip, milked the cow, picked the eggs, observed and talked with the farmer, seen the crops and the planting, etc. The trip must come first. In one weekly plan, a student, well intentioned in her desire for multicultural messages, thought that on a particular Thursday the children would "discuss Eskimo New Year." One can only imagine how they would do that. Clearly, what she meant was that the teacher would lecture about it. Again, we cannot ask children to "talk about" or draw about or "learn" about things that they have not experienced, either on their own or through the foundations we provide. So fifth is good foundation experiences that would be needed to explore important concepts beyond that which we can assume children have already experienced.

Sixth and last, we have general developmental needs. Before we have actually met the children, we have, hopefully, a basic understanding of the age group. We know that there are certain common needs among young children of particular age ranges, related to fine motor skills, sharing, self-expression, awareness of feelings, etc., and that activities we would plan to help develop these would be relevant and useful to most if not all of the children in our class. While being clear that children develop at different rates and, so, chronological age is only a starting point in our understanding of children, we do have to start somewhere. We try to plan multi-level activities, so that children at different developmental levels can do them in different depths and complexities and styles. But we can certainly start sketching the evolution of our curriculum, beginning with themes or projects related to "me" (self and group awareness, feelings, body, senses, self-esteem, individuality) and the classroom (routines, rules, behaviors, values, community building) and moving out toward those related to family, growth and nature, community, basic mathematical relationships and concepts, and others. We must leave room, much room, for other studies and for the possible directions in which children could take these concepts. "Webbing" is a particularly good way to "plan for possibilities," as it is based on pondering and mapping out the various ways that each concept could branch off into sub-concepts and other concepts. This allows us to anticipate some of the connections, choices and divergings children might make, so as to be ready for them with ideas and materials.

Having looked at what curriculum is and where it comes from, the next consideration is how to develop it. Most early childhood teachers *do* plan using themes. And themes, in and of themselves, can be used quite appropriately, as the previous discussion was meant to illustrate. It is recommended to the reader, however, that s/he take a look at the idea of projects versus themes, as utilized in the "project approach," the centerpiece of the Reggio Emilia Approach, and its predecessor, the Bank Street Approach. Projects differ from themes in perhaps subtle but nonetheless significant ways. Projects tend to be more child driven, more focused, more active and less arbitrarily imposed by the teacher. In the Reggio Emilia Approach, the teachers observe, and listen to the children during their creative initiatives and experimentations, their expressions of "The 100 Languages of Children." They take notes, pictures, audio and videotapes ("documentation"). During meetings they "revisit" what children have done, "bouncing the (curriculum) ball back and forth" in an effort to develop a project idea or direction. From there, small groups of children further develop the project, in relation to which the teacher continually determines her/his most beneficial support role, and

continues to document the work in progress, for the children, for parents and for themselves, for child evaluation and future planning. This “negotiated curriculum,” the product of co-planning and social construction between the teacher and the children and amongst the children, sharpens for us the vision of what appropriate early childhood curriculum can really be. Several videos showing this approach are available, including one wherein a song that a child came in singing led to a fascinating project about the Titanic, and one wherein a bird feeder project led to another, beautiful one about creating a playground for those birds. The skills, concepts and values that children need to develop are skillfully and sensitively integrated into what the children are doing, rather than being imposed on them as they “listen, watch and obey.”

But themes do serve valuable purposes, especially while we become more able to let go further and move toward more of a project approach. But there are important provisos about the way we do themes. First and foremost, the themes must be child centered. What that means is that they must fit the criteria described earlier, that they must derive principally from the children’s needs, interests, ideas and experiences, including as individuals. They should not be arbitrarily imposed because that is what administrators or parents want or because that is what this age group is “supposed” to be working on or this time of year is for. At the beginning of the year, the children need to learn about each other and the classroom procedures. So it would not be appropriate to start with some “cute” thing like frogs or bears, as has been witnessed in some programs. We do not know if they are interested in such things, and there are more relevant things they have to explore first. As a matter of fact, the word “cute” needs to be banished entirely from our vocabulary. Any activity which is done because it is “cute” is almost assuredly lacking in real substance. There must be true purpose in what children do. We are planting important seeds, seeds of self-esteem, self-expression, individuality, thinking skills, social skills, values, emotional health, imagination, creativity, self-control, inclusion and the like, and we have these children and this opportunity for such a precious little time. That does not mean that activities should not be fun, even silly. But too many programs are built around making stupid hats and boring dittos and meaningless gimmicks, wasting the children’s time and our own creativity and integrity. Activities should never be done because a teacher saw it done and it was “cute,” nor to impress parents or bemuse anyone.

So, again, themes that are truly relevant, substantive and useful to children can serve an important purpose in our curriculum planning. Such themes, as enumerated earlier, would focus on aspects of me, family, community, feelings, values, growth and people, among others. The reader may notice the absence of possibly the most commonly used theme: letters. Simply and directly put, such an academically focused curriculum is inappropriate, and this is why. Academics do not exist in a vacuum, they exist in a meaningful context. To remove them from that context and put the focus directly on them as isolated pieces of information is confusing and counterproductive. Let us say that the school has decided that a given week will be “B week.” During that week one might find the children playing with balloons and balls and bubbles, eating broccoli and making butter, reading Babar and visiting the Bronx. And certainly such a week is an improvement over the even more traditional method of having the children endlessly trace and recite B’s, topped off by the even more inappropriate homework exercises, cutting into play, socialization, exercise and leisure that children need even

more because they are so often insufficiently provided in school. But while the children are doing all of this “B” stuff, how much are they really learning about “B” that would not be learnt just by telling them, “Oh, by the way, all of these words start with ‘B’.” This approach is basically a gimmick. The thought process involved in the planning is fundamentally flawed. Rather than undertaking the intellectual challenge of breaking down a concept into its sub-concepts and planning a network and progression of possible activities through which children can discover and connect them, the teacher role is reduced to coming up with a bunch of activities that start with the same letter and throwing them anywhere. It is illogical, uncreative and, ultimately, dishonest. There are no real connections between the activities for children to discover and build knowledge from; they just exist for a single, instructional purpose, and any fun or meaning is really “beside the point.” They are not doing the activities for any inherent purpose. It is being done for parents, or so we can say we did something academic and fulfilled some empty responsibility. The point is that letters exist in real places: in books, in signs, in songs, in games. That is where children should discover them, and at their own pace and truly *as a personal discovery*. So the oft asked question of, “When *should* we introduce academics?” is moot. We are *always* introducing academics, in everything we do. It is not when, but how. What makes the other themes appropriate is that children can approach them at whatever their level of development and experience. Every child has a “me.” Every child has a family, has some experience and conception of growth, has feelings and an inherent need to do something with them. How can we say that every child will be ready on the seventh week of the school year to confront and understand the letter “B?” and why *should* they be? And there is nothing multi-dimensional about the week. Essentially, either they “get it” or they don’t.

There should be plenty of room left in the school year for the developed and spontaneous plans that derive from the children. Any annual curriculum which is established ahead of time, other than its starting and possible fallback points, cannot be even remotely appropriate. The curriculum should integrate each of the various curriculum areas – art (creative self-expression), language (and literature), science (experimentation), math (relationships and patterns), social studies (people, their similarities and differences, roles and relationships), music and movement and cooking – not for their own sake, but as vehicles for the concepts, skills and values at their center. And it should be “process-oriented.” This is one of the most important principles of early childhood education, and what it means is that the important thing is not the finished product nor the correct performance but the entire process by which the child got there. A few illustrations might be helpful.

A child is painting at the easel. What appears is the most beautiful painting the teacher has ever seen, one worthy (in *her* eyes) of framing. But what had once been that beautiful painting is transformed before her eyes into a greenish-brownish-grayish sappy-drippy-wrinkly mess. The question is, Should the teacher have stopped the child when the painting was beautiful? And the answer, unequivocally, is no. Not only is it a simple matter of the painting being his, not hers, but consider all that the child learned through being able to continue, about color, about texture, about finishing. A second illustration would involve two teachers, both of whom have as a general goal for the year that all of her five year olds would learn to write their names, so as to be able to get library cards. Now, this is not unreasonable as long as children are allowed to do so at their own pace

and in their own way (or not). But they go about it in entirely different ways. One teacher uses those horrid connect-the-dots ditto sheets, and what were once the most important words and challenge for the children, one that they had been in the intrinsic and compelling process of working toward from the time they began scribbling and even before, now become boring, impersonal, failure-possible work. The other teacher, with a very similar goal, instead brings in a camera, takes pictures of all of the children, writes all of their names, makes sturdy, self-correcting matching puzzles out of them and puts them out for play and discovery. Now do you figure that between these and their names on the attendance chart and their names on the job chart and their names on each piece of their artwork and their names on their cubbies and their names on their underwear that eventually they will figure out what their names look like? The point is that it is not a race, nor a test, nor a competition nor a performance.

Illustration three: Two teachers have and use the very same name cards, but they do so in quite contradictory ways. The first tells the children to, at the end of group time, find their name cards and give them to her so that they may get on line to go outside, get their snack, etc. In other words, they need to perform to her satisfaction (“woof woof”) in order to earn the privilege of something that should be a right in the first place. The other teacher tells the children to, at the end of group time, find their name cards to put on the attendance chart, put on the job chart, use as their placemat, etc. In other words, here there is a *reason* for them to learn to do so – not to please the teacher or prove something but as part of a meaningful purpose and process: a game, an activity, a job, etc. Fourth and finally, we can look at the example of making playdough. In my Activities course, we do this the very first week of the course. And this is by no means frivolous; making playdough is a profound experience. We do not make it just to make it. If the purpose of the activity were the playdough, the teacher might as well just bring some in. Every step of the process matters. We sit down and look at the picture chart, asking questions about what we are going to make, why and how. We bring out the first ingredient, flour, examine it, touch it, taste it, discuss its properties and when we have used it before, and consider how it will contribute to the making of playdough. Then we bring out the salt, compare it to the flour, combine them and think about where we are and what we have to do next and why. And on it goes. Where do we get the water from? Why is the color taking so long to mix in? How come you asked for red and got pink? What do you want to do with the playdough, take it home or combine it? It is not getting to the end, to rush and test and control the kids. It is each and every opportunity that is planned and comes up for developing thinking, senses, feelings, values, motor skills, vocabulary, individuality, socialization and on and on.

To paraphrase those great philosophers Aerosmith, “(An activity or curriculum)’s a journey, not a destination.” It is not how it comes out, it is what the child puts into it and gets out of it. It is not what the child creates, but the process of creativity. It is not what the child answers, but the process of thinking. There is no answer that is so important, especially for a young child, that emphasizing it should interfere with children learning to think, observe, explore, question, disagree, test, take time and collaborate. There is no work of art that is so important, especially for a young child, that emphasizing it should interfere with children learning to sense, appreciate, explore, immerse, self-evaluate, imagine and create. In looking for a program for my son, I had thought that I had found one that would meet most of his and our needs. I was actually

putting my coat on when I saw something out of the corner of my eye that made me immediately sit down again. As children were finishing some rather arbitrary bus project, which I do not believe they had any choice about participating in, and leaving the table, the teacher was “fixing” their work. We should be outraged. What is the message to them? So often children go home with “artwork” that is neither really art nor really theirs. It is overly directed or even done by the teachers to impress the parents. Too many classrooms have wall displays of children’s “artwork” that is indistinguishable from one another. But young children’s artwork, true *art* work is not supposed to necessarily look like anything or anybody’s. It is meant to be a unique creation, one which is experimental, developmental, symbolic, personal and enjoyable. So is a curriculum. There are many more considerations and qualities to consider in discussing what makes a curriculum appropriate or inappropriate. This reflection is just meant as a provocative and evocative starting point. Curriculum planning is extremely hard work if done right, but it is one of the most creative and intellectual things we do. But, most importantly of all, we do not do it alone, we do it as a cooperative and learning process with our colleagues and with our children.