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The Role of Curriculum Models in Early Childhood Education

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Prior to the introduction of experimental preschool intervention programs in the late 1950s, *systematic* variation of early childhood programs was minimal. This situation changed with the advent of early intervention programs for preschool-aged children, including the launch of Head Start in 1965 and its continuation into the primary grades in 1967 via Project Follow Through. These two federal programs propelled a national search for early childhood curricula that would effectively prepare children from low-income families to succeed in school. The era was marked by systematic comparisons among a burgeoning array of new curriculum models. Interest waned in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, as research revealed the limited differential impact of various models on children's academic achievement.

Interest in comparing the effectiveness of curriculum models resurfaced in the late 1980s. Questions about the public education of 4-year-olds, efforts by national organizations to define appropriate educational practices for young children, and results of longitudinal research that challenged earlier conclusions that varying curricula did not contribute to different child outcomes helped rekindle interest (Powell, 1987). However, as demand for child care and concern about its impact escalated in response to women's growing labor force participation, interest in differences among early childhood curriculum models diminished once more.

Use of early childhood curriculum models is again on the rise, fueled in part by the growth of state-financed prekindergarten programs. This revival can be attributed to at least four trends: (1) the galvanizing power of Goals 2000 and its first education goal that all children will enter school ready to learn, (2) heightened concern about the low academic achievement of children from low-income families, (3) state policy makers' responses to findings from neuroscience on early brain development, and (4) widespread evidence documenting the overall low quality of center-based and family child care. Well-studied curriculum models are being promoted to school districts and state officials as the means to ensure dependable quality in early childhood programs, deliver consistent child outcomes, and provide accountability for public investments in early childhood education, especially for 3- and 4-year-olds (Goffin & Wilson, 2001).

Types of Early Childhood Curriculum Models

The term *curriculum model* refers to a conceptual framework and organizational structure for decision making about educational priorities, administrative policies, instructional methods, and evaluation criteria. Although they vary in their underlying premises, curriculum models provide well-defined frameworks to guide program implementation and evaluation.

A wide range of early childhood curriculum models exists, but little is known about the number of early childhood curriculum models presently in use or the number of early childhood programs that use them. Early childhood curriculum models most often are used in center-based settings providing half-day and full-day programs. They are used in public schools, Head Start, and community-based programs. Consistent with their origin, curriculum models are most often used in programs serving low-income children.

Among the best known and most widely used early childhood curriculum models are the Creative Curriculum, the Developmental Interaction Approach (sometimes called the Bank Street approach), the High/Scope Curriculum, and the Montessori method. Descriptions of these and other early childhood curriculum models, many of which extend into the kindergarten and primary grades, can be found in Epstein, Schweinhart, and McAdoo, (1996), Goffin and Wilson (2001), and Roopnarine and Johnson (2000).

Theories of child development have served as the principal foundation for curriculum model development. Variations among curriculum models 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.

Early childhood curriculum models also vary in terms of the freedom granted to teachers to interpret implementation of the model's framework. Some curriculum models are highly structured and provide detailed scripts for teacher behaviors. Others emphasize guiding principles and expect teachers to determine how best to implement these principles. Curriculum models, regardless of their goals and the degree of flexibility in their implementation,

however, are designed to promote uniformity across early childhood programs through the use of a prepared curriculum, consistent instructional techniques, and predictable child outcomes.

Some question whether what is known as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), as described by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), should be classified as a curriculum model. But DAP does not meet all the criteria of a curriculum model. It was created not as a fully developed curriculum but as a tool to help practitioners and policy makers distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate teaching practices with young children, regardless of the curriculum approach under review.

This same question has been raised regarding the Reggio Emilia approach, an innovative early childhood program from Reggio Emilia, Italy, that has captured the imagination of early childhood educators around the world. Proponents of the Reggio Emilia approach resist the U.S. tendency to define the approach as a curriculum model because they believe the designation is contrary to the program's dynamic and emergent quality. Contrary to the structure imposed by curriculum models, educators in Reggio Emilia are engaged in continual renewal and readjustment informed by reflection, experimentation, and practice.

Comparative Evaluations of Curriculum Models

Empirical comparisons of early childhood curriculum models have been dominated by two questions: (1) To what extent are the programs experienced by children really different from each other? and (2) Are some programs better than others in producing desired outcomes?

Comparative evaluations now suggest that early childhood curriculum models do affect child outcomes. Differences in child outcomes among models tend to reflect the intent of the curriculum model being evaluated. Further, findings are accumulating that suggest potential negative consequences associated with highly structured, academic preschool programs (Marcon, 1999; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Goffin & Wilson, 2001).

The focus of contemporary evaluations has shifted, however, from comparisons of specific early childhood curriculum models to the differential impact of early intervention programs defined as either academically or developmentally oriented. Yet there also is recognition of the limitations of curricular reform. As a result, contemporary early intervention programs are increasingly likely to extend beyond use of curriculum models to include preventive health, parent education, and family support components.

A Quandary for the Field

Driven by public demands for positive child outcomes, the sense of urgency surrounding school reform, and the prevalence of poor-quality child care, early childhood curriculum models are being promoted as a way of ensuring that public dollars are wisely spent and that children enter school ready to learn. Consistent implementation of curriculum models has the potential to raise the standards of care and education experienced by young children. In light of uneven expectations for teachers' professional preparation and variability across the states in child care licensing standards, early childhood curriculum models can improve programmatic quality through the consistent implementation of well-articulated curriculum frameworks, thereby lifting the floor of program quality in early childhood education.

Some experts, however, believe that by their design, curriculum models lower expectations for early childhood educators and diminish the professional responsibilities of early childhood teachers. To achieve consistency across sites, curriculum models operate by using predictable representations of teaching and learning, relying on fixed interpretations of the nature of children and teachers, and minimizing variation across sites. Teachers function less as reflective practitioners and more as technicians who implement others' educational ideas. The increasing use of curriculum models, therefore, challenges the early childhood profession to examine its image of teachers and deliberate how best to improve children's daily experiences in early childhood settings (Goffin & Wilson, 2001).

For More Information

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References identified with an ED (ERIC document), EJ (ERIC journal), or PS number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 1,000 locations worldwide and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses such as UnCover (800) 787-7979 or ISI (800) 523-1850.

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