Preschool Curriculum Decision-Making: Dimensions to Consider

by Ellen Frede and Debra J. Ackerman

Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels recognize the key role preschool education plays in children's learning and development, but they may have less understanding of what constitutes a high-quality preschool program curriculum. Given the multitude of available curriculum models, the confusion regarding which ones are appropriate for 3- and 4-year-olds is understandable. However, if one of the goals of preschool is to improve children's school success by enhancing their early skills and knowledge, programs serving preschoolers need to decide the content of what children should learn, as well as how they will best learn it. This fact sheet provides a framework for decision-makers to use in evaluating which curriculum might be most appropriate for their specific preschool program.

What We Know:

• Preschool curriculum models vary widely. Some may detail exactly what to teach. Others may provide guidance in developing activities and interactions. How play is defined and used can also vary.
• A single curriculum may not address all of the different areas of learning. Curricula may appear to be comprehensive, but the focus on some domains is superficial and will not expand children's knowledge or develop the skills necessary for their later learning.
• Even if a curriculum fits a program's philosophy and provides the needed amount and type of content, it might not be appropriate for the children enrolled. In addition, if it is impossible for teachers to implement, it will be ineffective.
• Not all curriculum models have been empirically evaluated or even based on a systematic and comprehensive review of research of how young children learn. In addition, no single curriculum or approach has been proven to be best for all preschool programs.

Recommendations for Decision-Makers:

• To help discern which curricula are more appropriate, the roles of the teacher and the child in the learning process and the areas of learning to be addressed should be considered.
• Curricular decisions should take into account children's ages, behavior or learning needs, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and economic status, as well as teachers' prior training and experience and need for ongoing professional development.
• Assessment systems should be specifically designed to measure whether learning objectives are being reached, engage children in meaningful tasks within a realistic context, and document changes over time.
• For parent involvement, curricula should help build program-family partnerships and establish ongoing meaningful communication with families.
• Decision-makers should look for research evidence of a model's effectiveness and attempt to see the model in action in multiple settings.
What Makes a “Curriculum” a Curriculum?

At its simplest, curriculum is defined as what to teach and how to teach it. Some preschool stakeholders feel that a curriculum must detail exactly what to teach, as well as how to teach it and when. Others argue that while this is a type of curriculum, what is more appropriate for young children is one that provides learning goals and guidance to teachers in developing activities and interactions that can lead to accomplishing those goals. This includes carefully planned environments and activities in the classroom, such as story telling at circle time or the obstacle course added to the playground for one week to help children develop spatial terminology and exercise. It also includes unplanned and spontaneous learning, such as learning about water systems when a pipe bursts or developing self-regulation skills while taking turns on the slide.

Questions to Consider When Making Curriculum Decisions

Preschool policymakers and stakeholders face a variety of decisions, such as selecting a curriculum for a specific preschool program, generating a list of recommended curricula from which programs may choose, or evaluating the appropriateness of curricula already in use. They should consider a variety of criteria contained in the following checklist:

1. How does the curriculum define the roles of the teacher and the child in the learning process? Guidance: Multiple curriculum approaches have been developed to reflect various developmental theories. The roles of teacher and child in the learning process vary with the approach chosen.

2. What domains of learning are addressed? Are they integrated or treated separately? Will the curriculum lead to achievement of state early learning standards? Guidance: A preschool program’s curriculum should attend to children’s overall development. A single curriculum may not address all the domains of learning and those that claim to may not necessarily do it well.

3. Does the curriculum provide guidance for differentiating teaching for students with special behavioral, linguistic, or learning needs? Guidance: A curriculum model may fulfill basic requirements and yet not be appropriate for the children served. Age, economic status, cultural context, and language of children attending are important factors in curriculum decisions.

4. Do the curriculum’s developers provide an assessment system that is consistent with the teaching philosophy and learning content? Guidance: Assessment is central to ascertaining effectiveness. Each approach to assessment has strengths and weaknesses. Standardized tests, for instance, are rarely the best way to help teachers improve and they may not inform as to how well a curriculum is working unless specifically developed for that curriculum.

5. What research evidence exists to support the value or effectiveness of the curriculum? Guidance: Evaluations of curriculum effectiveness are important in an environment where some make unsubstantiated claims. Even when a curriculum has been evaluated, keep in mind that no single curriculum has been proven to be best for all preschool programs.

6. Is the curriculum appropriate for all teachers, regardless of their qualifications? What kind of professional development is provided? Guidance: Teachers are the “street level” implementers and curricula should be evaluated for how dependent they are on teacher experience and education. The initial training and ongoing professional development components provided along with curricula are essential to program effectiveness.

7. Are specific materials required to implement the curriculum? Guidance: Children learn through interacting with materials. Some, such as blocks or clay, are open-ended and have multiple uses. Others, such as puzzles, have only one use and can be expensive. Curricula vary as to their dependence on and the expense of materials required.

8. Does the curriculum model provide guidance for such services as parent involvement and the transition to kindergarten? Guidance: How much emphasis stakeholders place on family involvement may figure into decision-making since curricula vary as to the materials and guidance they provide in this regard.

Final Thoughts for Preschool Curriculum Decision-Makers

Years of development and research have been invested in designing and researching a variety of curriculum models. However, choosing a curriculum model also involves careful research on the part of the decision-makers. Decision-makers need to be skeptical of curriculum developers’ claims unless they are confirmed by researchers who are unaffiliated with the curriculum model. The promise of preschool will not be met if the curricula implemented are not rigorously designed, carefully researched, and implemented as intended.