What is a Curriculum?

A curriculum is a written document with specific goals, learning experiences, methods of instruction, and materials for implementation.

When we recently asked teachers for the name of the curriculum they used, more than 20% of the teachers in our study responded with the names of things that were not curricula. Research has shown that children have better outcomes when a teacher uses a curriculum rather than none (Chambers, Cheung, & Slavin, 2006).

A curriculum is a written document made up of several elements that together guide the teacher’s instruction. The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (2012, June) lists these elements: (a) goals for children’s development and learning; (b) experiences through which children will achieve the goals; (c) roles for staff . . . to help children to achieve these goals; and (d) materials needed to support the implementation of a curriculum.

Specific goals

The goals focus your instruction on the most important skills and knowledge that children will need. An example of a specific math goal is: ‘Children identify the geometric shapes of circle, square, triangle, and rectangle’. Most often, the goals are to be achieved by the end of the school year. You know that the skills and knowledge need to be sequenced and reached in certain time periods so that children will be ready for success in kindergarten. The Reggio Emilia approach offers wonderful emergent learning experiences, but doesn’t have a specific set of goals, and so it is not a curriculum.

Learning experiences

A curriculum provides specific learning experiences to meet the goals in an organized, sequenced manner. If you are not using a curriculum, it is likely that the activities being planned are not introducing and supporting the acquisition of critical skills. The Foundations to the Indiana Academic Standards for Young Children presents what is to be learned, but it is not a curriculum because it doesn’t provide the learning experiences, methods of instruction, or materials needed for implementation.

Methods of instruction

Methods of instruction in a curriculum inform teachers about their roles in the teaching-learning process. For example, the teacher is to be the discussion leader, demonstrator, experiment participant, or other role. In addition, methods define the way to introduce an activity to children letting them know what they will learn. Methods also describe the instructional sequence of what things to emphasize and when in order to build children’s understanding.

Materials needed

Materials are included or defined by the curriculum to ensure that the teacher has what is needed to successfully implement the experiences and instruct the children. Such materials might be the picture, story, and nonfictional books to use or word and letter cards, as well as the types and quantities of manipulatives needed.

A well-designed curriculum has each of its parts synchronized with the others. The parts are aligned to ensure that children learn.
Tip Sheets for Teachers: Practices to Promote School Readiness

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We know that high quality early education represents one of the best investments that society can make for promoting successful educational outcomes for all children, but particularly for children who are at risk (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Early education, if it is done well, can significantly erase or minimize the achievement gaps that exist for many of our children (Barnett, 2011; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The evidence is so overwhelming, that 39 of this country’s 50 states have elected to provide public-funded prekindergarten for its preschoolers (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). The most recent report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2011, estimates that these 39 states provided prekindergarten services for 28% of all 4-year olds in this country. Unfortunately, Indiana is not of those states. In the absence of funding and state leadership, Indiana preschoolers have to rely on a patchwork system of services that falls short of the needed capacity to serve children who need these services most (Indiana Education Roundtable, 2012).

In 2012, we initiated a study to investigate how well existing early education programs in Indiana were doing. We were interested in seeing how well our classrooms performed in relation to other states. We wanted to see how well our practices aligned with current research evidence documenting effective early education, and we were curious to see how well different programs in our state compared with one another. We sent out invitations to all Head Start programs, licensed child care centers and public school preschools in the state. Video-recorded observations were completed in 81 classrooms that were geographically and socio-economically representative: 28 licensed child care centers; 27 Head Start classrooms, and; 26 public school classrooms. We recorded only in-class, morning activities; and analyzed each observation using two tools; the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), and the Emerging Academic Snapshot (EAS) (Ritchie, Howes, Kraft-Sayre, & Weiser, 2002).

The CLASS focuses on three broad domains of effective teacher-child interactions that characterize children’s classroom experiences: Emotional Support, Organizational Support, and Instructional Support. Emotional Support captures how teachers help children develop positive relationships, enjoyment in learning, comfort in the classroom, and appropriate levels of independence. Classroom Organization focuses on how well teachers manage the classroom to maximize learning and keep children engaged. The Instructional Support domain involves how teachers promote children’s thinking and problem solving, use feedback to deepen understanding, and help children develop more complex language skills. The Emerging Academic Snapshot measures the types and frequency of activities and instruction to which children are exposed. The types of activities recorded include common preschool activities such as free choice time, whole group time, basic routines, small group instruction, individual work time, and meal/snack times. It further looks at children’s exposure to various curricular areas, including aesthetics (art, music, dance), literacy/language, math, science, and social studies. Some teacher actions (instruction) are also included.

We hope that the information we gained from this study benefits both policy makers and classroom practitioners. For policy makers, our goal is to establish a comparative baseline of program quality from which clear directions and decisions can be made to enhance preschool services in Indiana. For practitioners, our hope is that the insights we made about the presence (and absence) of evidence-based early education practices can inform their decisions concerning classroom schedules, curricula, and teaching practices.

This series of tip sheets looks at some of the findings of our research in a quick, one-page format. More information, including a breakdown of the data and more detailed discussion can be found on the Early Childhood Center website.