

DAP: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Achieve Meaningful Goals

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The curriculum consists of the plans for the learning experiences through which children acquire knowledge, skills, abilities, and understanding. Implementing a curriculum always yields outcomes of some kind—but which outcomes those are and how a program achieves them are critical. In developmentally appropriate practice, the curriculum helps young children achieve goals that are meaningful because they are culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally and educationally significant. The curriculum does this through learning experiences that reflect what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular.

Learning through play is a central component of curriculum, and it incorporates strategies to extend learning through play across the full age and grade span of early education. Ideally, the curriculum is planned in a coordinated fashion across age and grade spans so that children's knowledge and skills are developed in a coherent, aligned manner, with each age or grade span building on what was learned previously. A well-designed developmentally and culturally relevant curriculum avoids and counters cultural or individual bias or stereotypes and fosters a positive learning disposition in each area of the curriculum and in each child.

The idea of mirrors and windows⁷² is useful for curriculum development. The curriculum should provide mirrors so that children see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the learning environment, materials, and activities. The curriculum should also provide windows on the world so that children learn about peoples, places, arts, sciences, and so on that they would otherwise not encounter. In diverse and inclusive learning communities, one child's mirrors are another child's windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning.

Because children learn more in programs where there is a knowledge-rich, well-rounded curriculum that is well planned and implemented, it is important for every school and early childhood program to have its curriculum in written form. Having a written curriculum does not preclude the use of an emergent curriculum based on children's interests and experiences that is also aligned with applicable early learning standards, and it provides an organized framework through which educators can ensure that the children's learning experiences are consistent with the program's goals for the children. Use of a formal, validated curriculum can be helpful, so long as educators have the flexibility to adapt units and activities to meet the interests and experiences of each group of specific children. Rigid, narrowly defined, skills-focused, and highly teacher-scripted curricula that do not provide flexibility for adapting to individual skills and interests are not developmentally appropriate.

The following key factors, taken together, describe curriculum planning that is developmentally appropriate for children from birth through the primary grades.

A. Desired goals that are important for young children's development and learning in general and culturally and linguistically responsive to children in particular have been identified and clearly articulated.

1. *Educators consider what children are expected to know, understand, and be able to do when they leave the setting.* This includes across the domains of physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development and across the subject or content areas, including language, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health.
2. *Educators are thoroughly familiar with state early learning standards or other mandates.* They add to these other goals missing from the existing standards.
3. *Educators and administrators establish and regularly update goals with input from all stakeholders, including families.* Goals are clearly defined for, communicated to, and understood by all stakeholders, including families.

B. The program has a comprehensive, effective curriculum that targets the identified goals across all domains of development and subject areas.

1. *Whether or not educators participated in the development of the curriculum, they familiarize themselves with it and consider its comprehensiveness in addressing all important goals.*

- 2. When the program uses published curriculum products, the selected products are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive for the children served and provide flexibility for educators to make adaptations to meet the specific interests and learning needs of the children they are teaching.*
- 3. If educators develop the curriculum themselves, they make certain it targets identified learning goals and applicable early learning standards. They actively engage families and communities to inform its development. Educators use up-to-date resources from experts to ensure that curriculum content is accurate and comprehensive.*

C. Educators use the curriculum framework in their planning to make sure there is ample attention to important learning goals and to enhance the coherence of the overall experience for children.

- 1. Educators are familiar with the understandings and skills in each domain (physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive) that are key for the children in their group. They know how development and learning in one domain impacts the other domains and crosses subject areas. They recognize that making sure the curriculum is culturally and linguistically relevant for each child is essential for supporting all development and learning across all domains and subject areas.*
- 2. In their planning and follow-through, educators use the curriculum framework along with what they know (from their observation, documentation, and other assessment) about the children's knowledge, interests, progress, languages, and learning needs. They carefully shape and adapt the experiences to be responsive to each child and to enable each child to reach the goals outlined in the curriculum.*
- 3. In determining the sequence and pace of learning experiences, educators consider the learning progressions that children typically follow, including the typical sequences in which skills and concepts develop. To maximize language development, educators recognize differences in developmental progressions for monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual children and support the development of multilingualism. Educators use these progressions with an eye toward helping each child progress in all areas, and they make adaptations as needed for individual children. When children's experiences have not matched the expectations for schooling, educators can both work to change inappropriate expectations and adapt the curriculum to build on children's strengths and help them gain skills and knowledge. Such adaptations should maintain children's agency; children can be partners with educators in guiding their learning, which reinforces high expectations and beliefs (on the part of both the child and the educator) in that child's potential.*

D. Educators make meaningful connections a priority in the learning experiences they provide each child. They understand that all learners, and certainly young children, learn best when the concepts, language, and skills they

encounter are related to things they know and care about, and when the new learnings are themselves interconnected in meaningful, coherent ways.

1. *Educators plan curriculum experiences that integrate children's learning.* They integrate learning within and across developmental domains (physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive) and subject areas (including language, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health).
2. *Educators plan curriculum experiences to build on the funds of knowledge of each child, family, and community in order to offer culturally and linguistically sustaining learning experiences.* Educators build on ideas and experiences that have meaning in the children's lives and are likely to interest them, in recognition that developing and extending children's interests is particularly important when children's ability to focus their attention is in its early stages.
3. *Educators plan curriculum experiences that follow logical sequences and that allow for depth, focus, and revisiting concepts.* That is, learning sequences allow children to spend sustained time with a more select set of content areas rather than skimming briefly over a wide range of topics. Educators plan to return to experiences in ways that facilitate children's memory and further understanding of concepts.

E. Educators collaborate with those teaching in the preceding and subsequent age groups or grade levels, sharing information about children and working to increase continuity and coherence across ages and grades. They also work to protect the integrity and appropriateness of practices at each level. For example, educators advocate for continuity in the curriculum that is coherent, consistent, and based on the principles of developmentally appropriate practice.

F. Although it will vary across the age span, a planned and written curriculum is in place for all age groups. Even if it is not called a curriculum, infant and toddler educators plan for the ways in which routines and experiences promote each child's development and learning. With infants and toddlers, desired goals will focus heavily on fostering secure relationships with caregivers and family members in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Although social, emotional, and language development—including home languages as much as possible—take center stage, these interactions and experiences are also laying the foundation for vocabulary and concepts that support later academic development across all subject areas. For preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades, the curriculum will deepen and extend to reflect children's more complex knowledge and skills across all subject areas. Continuing to provide culturally and linguistically sustaining care and supporting all domains of development as well as all subject areas remain essential.

View the full list of endnotes.

Audience: *Administrator (director or principal), Faculty, Family, Student (higher education), Teacher, Trainer*

Age: *Early Primary, Infant/Toddler, Kindergarten, Preschool*

Topics: *NAEYC General, Position Statement, Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

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