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Early Childhood Curriculum and Developmental Theory

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p0005

The term curriculum refers largely to planned approaches to teaching and learning that are guided by theoretical and philosophical beliefs about the nature of learners and about the kinds of knowledge(s) that should be taught. From this perspective, a curriculum contains specific content knowledge, objectives and goals, teaching procedures, and assessment strategies. From another perspective, curriculum is less planned in advance and seen as developing through interaction between teacher and students. Regardless of the exact definition, it is generally acknowledged that no curriculum is ideologically neutral. Curriculum makers, like other educators, have philosophical, political, and pedagogical beliefs that underlie the curriculum they create (Apple, 2004).

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Early Childhood Curriculum: Reflections of Images of Children

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In the field of early childhood education (for children birth through age 8), there is a wide range of curricular approaches and models that are guided by different philosophical beliefs about young children as learners and beliefs about the kinds of knowledge that are worth teaching children. The field (as discussed below) may be characterized by multiple, sometimes opposing or overlapping, images of the child as learner:

- child as organism unfolding over time;
- child as scientific subject;
- child as creative player;
- child as active thinker; and
- child as relational and cultural agent.

These varied images of children have shaped curricular models for young children. Some models are closely guided by educational policies that serve specific groups of children, while others attempt to be more inclusively serving children with a full range of learning abilities and interests.

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Child Unfolding: Early Conceptualizations of Curriculum

p0015

One of the earliest systematic conceptualizations of curriculum in the field was created by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, well-known for his school for mixed-age groups of orphans in Yverdon, Switzerland (established 1805).

Influenced by Plato's and Rousseau's images of the innately good child unfolding naturally over time, Pestalozzi founded the doctrine of *Anschauung* (direct, concrete observation), and capitalized on children's spontaneity and adult or peer-guided activity (Weber, 1984). Through object lessons that encouraged children to observe and explore objects collected from the natural environment, Pestalozzi's curriculum acquainted children with form, language, and number classifications and encouraged children to cultivate their own powers of seeing, judging, and reasoning. An underlying curricular principle was to introduce abstract concepts through concrete objects, always progressing gradually and cumulatively from the easier to the more difficult concepts.

It was Friedrich W. Froebel who documented a curriculum for young children in Germany in the 1800s, based on Pestalozzi's work. He also drew from the philosophical thinking of Plato, Rousseau, and Comenius, complementing his own religious beliefs and intuitive understanding of the child as a naturally creative and productive being (Weber, 1984). Froebel's enduring significance to early years of education was through his formulation of the kindergarten (a combination of two German words: *kind* [children] and *garten* [garden]) system with its emphasis on play and its use of gifts (didactic play materials) and occupations (hands-on activities). Singing, dancing, and gardening were included in order to develop the whole child, although much of the curriculum highlighted the learning of mathematical concepts and symbolic relationships through manipulative objects such as blocks, spheres, and cylinders. Froebel invented the kindergarten to prove that children under 7 years of age were capable of obtaining intellectual and emotional skills through structured forms of play and adult guidance.

The success of Froebel's model resulted in compulsory kindergarten education for all children in the Austro-Hungarian Empire by 1872. The gradual spread of the kindergarten movement can be traced across other parts of Europe and the USA in the second half of the 19th century. Its introduction into the USA is accredited to the efforts of educators such as Elizabeth Peabody and Susan Blow. With the establishment of free kindergartens in working-class neighborhoods in the 1870s, advocates of kindergartens in the USA began to suggest that the proper education of these children could eventually alleviate urban poverty.

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s0015 Child as Subject: Scientific Views and Curricula as Early Intervention

p0030 At the turn of the twentieth century, the child study movement began in the USA. Seminal publications in psychology and philosophy that influenced early childhood education included G. Stanley Hall's *Contents of Children's Minds* (1883), Edward L. Thorndike's *Animal Intelligence* (1898), and John Dewey's *The School and Society* (1900). Influenced by scientific observation methods, especially those of Darwin in *The Origin of the Species* (1859), Hall advocated the use of systematic and direct observations of individual young children to inform curriculum. Arnold Gesell expanded on Hall's work by examining the correlation of ages and developmental stages and charting growth gradients of individual children. Such scientific studies of young children in the burgeoning field of developmental psychology appealed to many early childhood educators who subsequently propagated the generalized theoretical belief that there was an optimal period in the early years in which learning would be most effective.

p0035 The Froebelian kindergarten curriculum was to remain popular until the 10-year debate (1903–1913), which marked a turning point in early childhood curricular approaches. The debate was between those who supported Susan Blow and Elizabeth Peabody who argued for the continued relevance of the Froebelian kindergarten curriculum in the twentieth century, and progressive educators such as Patty Smith Hill who were influenced by John Dewey and Edward L. Thorndike arguing for curricular revision in order to keep up with the shifting socio-political context of society in the USA (Weber, 1984). Curriculum influenced by Dewey's educational philosophy placed social studies at the core of the curriculum since the purpose of education was for life in a democratic society. In contrast, Thorndike's behaviorist theory came to underlie the image of child as subject in the context of curriculum and of standardized testing.

p0040 Progressive educators increasingly influenced curriculum from the early 1900s and their work also drew upon a growing body of knowledge contributed by developmental psychologists. An example of one of the earliest eclectic curricula written by an educator of the progressive movement was the *Conduct Curriculum for Kindergarten and First Grade* (1923) by Patty Smith Hill at Teachers College, Columbia University. The curriculum was influenced by the theories of her contemporaries such as Thorndike and Dewey and was a culmination of her years of experimentation in loosening what Hill considered to be the rigidities of the Froebelian curriculum for children. The Conduct Curriculum combined elements of Dewey and Thorndike, respectively: it encouraged both social cooperation and democratic social responsibilities (a response to the changing American society at the time),

and it was a plan for systematic classroom instruction to modify children's thoughts, behaviors, and feelings (i.e., develop desirable habits).

Outside of the USA, in Italy around 1916, Maria Montessori (the first female doctor in her country) began advocating for her educational method for children who were then considered cognitively defective and those who lived in extreme poverty in Rome. Enduring initial dismissal by educators, including progressive educators in the USA, the Montessori approach is ironically still popular around the world among some middle- and upper-class communities, both as an academically focused approach in private schools and as a homeschooling method (Goffin and Wilson, 2001). It has also been modified to suit individual culture's values and needs while maintaining its emphasis on the training of young children's senses for intellectual development.

Child as Creative Player: A Psychodynamic and Developmental View

In contrast to child development study that focused on observable behaviors and outcomes, Freud's psychoanalytic theory encouraged early childhood educators to focus on the inner worlds of young children as biological and sexual beings. Over time however, his theory was modified and neo-Freudian psychodynamic classrooms featured curricula that encouraged children's self-expression and creativity through messy play with materials such as paints, clay, blocks, sand, and water. Lawrence Frank, a prominent American linked to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, built on the image of the child as an emotional being and highlighted the importance of free play in the curriculum for healthy socioemotional growth. Influenced by the theories of Erikson and Freud, Frank believed that emotional security and personality adjustment were keys to developing confident, social, yet independent learners. He advocated that teachers recognize individual differences among children, synthesizing psychodynamic work with the theory of Jean Piaget (Weber, 1984).

By the 1930s, in part because of Frank, many child development institutes and their corresponding lab schools had appeared in the USA. The research carried out at these institutes contributed to normative views of children's growth and abilities (e.g., in areas such as motor development, language, and adaptive behavior). Thus, such knowledge of average or normal child development became foundational in teacher education textbooks and guided the development of early childhood curriculum. Teachers planned curricular activities that would suit the assumed needs and abilities of the average child of a certain age group.

s0025 **Child as Subject Redux: Concern for Economically Poor Children in the USA**

p0060 In the 1960s in the USA, several scientific studies challenged the dominance of the fixed intelligence theory established earlier in the century by psychologist Alfred Binet, by showing how children's abilities could be enhanced by positive environmental influences (Goffin and Wilson, 2001). These studies eventually supported the inception of the federally funded Head Start program as part of the War on Poverty to provide academic skills and knowledge (e.g., language-based and numeracy skills) to children from low-income populations across the country. Interestingly, the motivation for the program was similar to Montessori's a half century earlier: to counter the impact of poverty through early education. Indeed, a curriculum based on Montessori's methods was one of a number of models that researchers and educators implemented as they tried to demonstrate positive effects of Head Start.

p0065 Another curriculum offered by Head Start was the Bereiter–Engelmann model (later developed into the direct instruction model) to help disadvantaged children catch up academically with their middle-class age mates. In this approach, work and play were on opposing ends of the curriculum as children were rewarded by food, tokens, or praise, when they accomplished academic tasks, that is, they got the right answers. Since the Bereiter–Engelmann model aimed to help Head Start children to attain some of the same skills and knowledge as their white, middle-class peers, it has been viewed as a deficit model that disregarded any of the children's own cultural knowledge and experiences. In the early twenty-first century, the direct instruction approach has been foregrounded again in the USA, due to the impact of the legislation known as No Child Left Behind. Funds associated with that legislation support scientifically based curricula. Thus, highly structured lessons that are clearly taught and whose outcomes are easily measured remain popular, especially in reading instruction, and in some special education approaches, for example, the reading curriculum Open Court and the applied behavioral analysis approach to special education.

s0030 **Child as Active Thinker: Piagetian Theory and Its Curricular Offshoots**

p0070 The 1960s also gave rise to curriculum models inspired by Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory that children's cognition develops through the sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete, and formal operational stages. For those persuaded by psychodynamic and developmental approaches, Piaget's comprehensive theory was a better fit than behaviorist approaches to improving the education

of young children. A number of influential programs were based on Piagetian theory, the best known of which is the High/Scope cognitively oriented curriculum, initiated as an experimental program by David Weikart, offered as a Head Start model in the 1960s, and now incorporated into the Head Start curriculum. The curriculum encouraged children's active learning and independent knowledge construction. Other curricula, such as the Constance Kamii-Rheta DeVries constructivist approach and George Forman's constructivist approach, demonstrate different interpretations and applications of Piagetian theory. Constructivist activities capitalize on children's interests and provide physical experiences with objects, logico-mathematical experiences, and interactivity (e.g., experimentation with peers).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Its Critics

By the 1980s, another great debate occurred in the early childhood education field. This time, some leaders in the field spoke out against behaviorally oriented curriculum models such as direct instruction. Through the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), these scholars published a position statement on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in 1986 (expanded in 1987) for standardizing the diverse range of practices found in an array of early childhood education provision (e.g., nursery schools, child care, Head Start, and kindergartens). The guidelines proved to be unexpectedly successful at the time as a much needed tool to provide uniformly high-quality services for young children and families. It was supported by a few longitudinal studies that verified the positive outcomes and benefits of High/Scope, a developmentally oriented curriculum. Such scientific support appealed to policymakers and public school leaders. The concept of DAP became a trendy phrase that was eventually taken up by some proponents of the direct instruction approach in the primary grades. The DAP guidelines were revised a decade after its first publication to accommodate the newer sociocultural perspective in developmental theory.

Just as there was a major debate that created a turning point in Froebelian curriculum in the early 1900s, a significant debate in the last decade of the twentieth century centered around DAP (see Charlesworth, 1998; Lubeck, 1998). Cross-cultural studies have also shown that adults in different cultures could have different views of what young children should learn or behave (see Tobin *et al.*, 1991; Tobin *et al.*, 2009). These studies point to the need to expand notions of what is meant by DAP, rather than to fixate on a search for the one best or most appropriate curriculum.

The Child as Relational and Cultural Agent

The Influence of Sociocultural Perspectives

Critics of Piagetian theory have argued that children do not merely construct knowledge in isolation from their social and cultural contexts. In the 1990s, proponents of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, provoked educators to consider a sociocultural view of teaching and learning. Central to Vygotsky's theory is the belief that human development is inseparable from social and cultural activities. Thus, children's development of higher mental processes involves learning to use the tools of culture, such as language and symbols, through the guidance of other people who are more skilled in the use of these tools. Other American psychologists who became aligned with this view included Jerome Bruner and Barbara Rogoff. The sociocultural view led teachers to use tools and strategies to cultivate the latent abilities that lie within each child's zone of proximal development (ZPD). Such a curriculum includes extended blocks of time for free play, thereby encouraging children to advance their play behaviors to utilize symbolic representations and actions, multiple and complex themes and roles (e.g., doctor theme merged with a restaurant theme) through the use of language to create pretend scenarios (Bodrova and Leong, 2007). Props and play materials in the classroom are to be iconic and simple rather than realistic. The curriculum should also allow children to create and review their plans for play, to problem solve, and to learn from one another as a way to extend their individual ZPD. According to the Vygotskian approach, learning is believed to lead development, contrary to the Piagetian notion that development is a prerequisite for learning to occur. These differences in perspective have inevitably shaped curricular approaches.

In the early 1980s, some scholars from the USA began studying programs for children from infancy through age 6 in the small Italian city of Reggio Emilia. Although the Italian educators do not consider their curriculum to be a model, many US educators have studied and tried to implement or adapt the approach. Although the approach is often characterized as focusing on art, founders emphasize representational art as only one of many modes of symbolic representation, which they refer to as languages (Edwards *et al.*, 1998). Integrated learning through extensive project work is impelled by both teacher planning and children's interests in their environment. Teachers' respect for children's strengths, careful documentation of children's work, and collaborative relationships with families led some early educators to cite Reggio Emilia as an exemplar of blending developmental and sociocultural approaches, embedded in both Piagetian and Vygotskian theories. The approach maintains an international following, as educators visit, and are inspired by, the program's centers and schools.

The sociocultural emphasis of the Vygotskian approach has also been used to further the work of multicultural educators. Various multicultural curricula aim to foster an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, and to promote intercultural relations that may lead to constructive social action in communities. Inherent in multicultural education is the notion that there are diverse ways of constructing and acquiring knowledge and that one's cultural heritage, home language, and personal experiences are legitimate funds of knowledge (Ramsey and Williams, 2003). Thus, the notion of school knowledge is broadened beyond white, middle-class European-American cultures and histories, and children are viewed as active and interactive agents who not only learn but are capable of creating change. Examples of established multicultural curriculum in the USA include the Anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks and ABC Taskforce, 1989). Outside the USA in New Zealand, the national Te Whariki curriculum (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1996) is an example of how policymakers and educators are determined to encourage bicultural early childhood curricular practices by empowering Maori, Pacific Islander, and white European-origin peoples.

Summing Up: Developmental Theories and Their Influence

Looking back historically, we have noted that educators in the field of early childhood see the roots of developmental psychology in the ideas of Pestalozzi and Froebel, who believed that children's abilities would unfold over time. Pestalozzi introduced careful observation, and both thinkers specified curricular choices attuned to children's interests and needs. Following the introduction of the kindergarten in Europe and the USA, the discourse of developmental psychology was built on the successes of nineteenth-century physical sciences inspired by the Darwinian revolution. Like their predecessors, developmental theorists of the twentieth century such as Piaget constructed universalist trajectories of human growth as dynamic, systematic, and irreversible processes.

Developmental psychology's prominence in early childhood curriculum, especially in the USA, was traced back to the 1920s and 1930s when a number of child development institutes were established around the country. These centers served to provide enrichment programs through nursery schools for young children from both middle- and low-income homes and gave developmental psychologists opportunities to further examine the role of the classroom environment, including curriculum, on affecting individual intelligence. After the inception of Head Start in the USA in 1964, part of the work of developmental psychologists was to assess the effectiveness of

early intervention programs for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

p0110 In the early twenty-first century, some theoretical and curricular stances seem to have cycled back to the 1960s as the discourse of developmental psychology gives way once again to a deficit orientation toward child learners. The legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act has revived the child as subject, who learns best through scientifically based behaviorist curricula. This image of the child has persisted for about a century and is not likely to fade away. Interestingly, however, early childhood professionals such as those on both sides of the recent debate about DAP have resisted this image and consistently represented curricula as broad enough to include child choice and agency. In other words, they have opted for a definition of curriculum that is interactive, dependent on the knowledge of both children and teachers and not on published curricular scripts.

s0055 **Postmodernist Critique: Limitations of Developmental Theory and a View toward the Future**

p0115 Within an international context, many societies are heading toward global capitalism, and are faced with much tension created by the clash of global and local knowledge(s) and cultural values. For some scholars, educating citizens in an increasingly globalized age is not simply about training a skilled workforce capable of creating economic growth and technological advancement, it is also about educating citizens who are intellectually versatile, open minded, socially responsible, and who want to achieve greater global tolerance and understanding of differences in cultures and values (e.g., Burbules and Torres, 2000; Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005). Thus, many have argued for a reconsideration of early childhood educators' reliance on child development theories in curriculum design because they limit one's view of what young children ought to learn.

p0120 Within the field of developmental psychology itself, the assumption about the predetermined and cumulative nature of human development was critiqued as early as 1978 in the Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association's Division of Developmental Psychology, *The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions* (Kessen, 1983). Related critiques were taken up by educators and psychologists in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Burman, 1994). They urged a reconceptualization of early childhood curriculum so that there would be less focus on individual psychological differences and more on diversity within and across cultures (e.g., Kessler and Swadener, 1992; Mallory and New, 1994).

p0125 Postmodernist critics have continued to challenge taken-for-granted essentialist and scientifically biased assumptions about human development and learning

and its view of the child as individual and self-contained (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005). Indeed, curricula that have been categorized as multicultural may offer the scope needed to encompass the diversity of views of children and curricula globally. Some scholars argue that the most flexible curricular approaches combine a constructivist theory of learning and development with a multicultural and activist orientation toward social justice. With a view of children as relational and cultural agents, adults teach about issues of equity and social justice and then encourage children to act to change communities (e.g., to create equitable rules for boys and girls within the classroom; start a recycling center in the school). The range of issues addressed could extend beyond race/ethnicity, class, and gender to include religion, spirituality, dis/ability, sexual orientation, technology and media, consumerism, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation in global communities. In short, there is an increasing need for more inclusive curriculum for all children.

Studies have shown that high-quality education for the early years is not entirely dependent on the curriculum model that is used, despite the continued preoccupation with such models. Instead, teacher quality is the most important factor (Goffin and Wilson, 2001). The way forward, then, is to stop searching for the one best model – to pause and evaluate the images of children that underlie value-laden teaching practices. From a postmodern perspective, socially just curricula (e.g., Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001; MacNaughton, 2004; Silin, 1995) require teachers to take the time to understand and situate individual children's cultures and the knowledge(s) to inform their curricular choices (i.e., content, perspectives, collaboration, strategies, and assessment). School leaders and policymakers, too, have the responsibility to encourage teachers to be knowledgeable enough to integrate a variety of teaching approaches and strategies instead of being implementers of fixed or scripted curriculum models.

In sum, early childhood curriculum will continue to be influenced by divergent theories of learning and development and contrasting images of young children. Thus, children and families around the globe will rely on the professional judgment of teachers and school administrators to choose curricula that are flexible enough for children's unique heritages and the funds of knowledge each child brings into the classroom. Maintaining such flexibility is no small task; but it is a challenge that must be met, as the increasing diversity within groups of children locally and globally make identification of one best curriculum for all an impossible and undesirable task.

See also: ECEC - an overview of contemporary issues (01161); Gender issues in ECEC (01165); Investing in ECEC - the educational case (01170); Teaching in early childhood - instructional methods and child outcomes (01186); Developing early learning standards (01204).

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Non-Print Items

Abstract:

Numerous early childhood curricular approaches and models have been popularized over the last century. None is value free as philosophies and developmental theories inevitably underpin curricular practices and design. In this article the authors trace the historical birth of formalized curriculum for young children to the work of Pestalozzi and Froebel. An overview of the key pendulum-swings of curriculum that have occurred in the early childhood field is then provided. The authors conclude with some postmodern critiques that have influenced the field to reconceptualize curricular thought and practice for an increasingly global, chaotic, and unpredictable era.

Keywords: Culture; Curriculum; Curriculum model; Developmental theory; Developmentally appropriate practices; Diversity; Early childhood education; Kindergarten; Multicultural education; Nursery; Postmodernism; Preschool

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Biographical Sketch for Online Version



Sirene May-Yin Lim graduated from Teachers College, Columbia University in 2007 with a doctor of education (EdD) in Early Childhood Education and is an assistant professor at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Her former teaching experience led her to conduct a dissertation study on the contemporary culture of a group of 4- and 5-year-olds in a Singapore childcare center, seen through a postcolonial lens. Her academic interests include the exploration of cultures, globalization, and

social justice issues in curriculum design and teacher preparation. She also continues to explore the integration of multi-literacies, including the arts, into curriculum for young children.



Celia Genishi is professor of education and chairperson of the Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University. She was formerly on the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin and the Ohio State University. A former secondary Spanish and preschool teacher, she teaches courses related to early childhood education and qualitative research methods. She is editor of *Ways of Assessing Children and Curriculum: Stories of Early Childhood Practice* and co-author (with Millie Almy) of *Ways of Studying Children* and (with Anne Haas Dyson) of *On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*. Her research interests include collaborative research with teachers, childhood bilingualism, and language use in classrooms. She is a recipient of the Advocate for Justice Award, from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.