

A Curriculum Framework That Supports Quality Early Childhood Education for All Young Children

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Kamerville Elementary has two inclusive pre-K classrooms in which diverse groups of young children participate 4 half-days each week. The preschool teachers, Jane and Michelle, are asked by their director to provide a brief description of the curriculum they use and demonstrate how it aligns with the state's pre-K standards and how it meets federal requirements for monitoring progress toward three child outcomes identified for early childhood special education. As Jane and Michelle approach the task, they realize that they have very different ideas about their curriculum. Jane thinks it is the weekly lesson plans they develop, and Michelle thinks of it as the published books they use that are filled with activity ideas. Further into their discussion, Jane and Michelle discover additional discrepancies in their interpretations of state standards and federal child outcomes and how to monitor child progress toward those standards, particularly for children with disabilities. Both soon realize that they are not sure what their curriculum is, how to align it to state standards, and whether they have data to show child progress toward federal outcomes. To address the educational needs of all children (i.e., those with and without disabilities) and to meet state and federal mandates related to children's future success, they agree to spend time gaining a better understanding of how to conceptualize a curriculum to serve as the foundation for promoting positive outcomes for all children.

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The field of early education is experiencing increased attention to curriculum for young children, specifically in terms of what preschool-age children are taught, how they are taught, and how progress is measured. Such attention is due in part to an increased understanding of the impact of early education coupled with the desire for accountability for funds invested in early education and early intervention (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). For these reasons, and the day-to-day challenges illustrated in the opening vignette, efforts have begun to better define and conceptualize early childhood curricula as well as discuss the ways in which quality educational opportunities are being provided to young children and their families (Division for Early Childhood, 2007; National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003).

The curriculum, defined in various ways, is the foundation on which services are systematically designed, implemented, and evaluated (Division for Early Childhood, 2007; Hojnoski & Missall, 2006; Pretti-Frontczak, Jackson, McKeen, & Bricker, in press). Specifically, how educational team members view curriculum affects the type and quality of services provided. For example, if educators view curriculum simply as the theme for the week or a collection of enjoyable activities, they may not pay sufficient attention to assessing children's current strengths and needs or to determining if planned activities result in desired outcomes for children.

Furthermore, educators working with young children with disabilities may tend to view the individualized education plan as the curriculum, resulting in too narrow of a focus in terms of what is taught. In general, early childhood educators who operate without a clearly defined and well-conceptualized curriculum do not have the underlying foundation from which to design, implement, and evaluate quality services for young children.

Recommended practice for working with young children and their families defines curriculum as a "complex idea containing multiple components including goals, content, pedagogy, and instructional practices" (Division for Early Childhood, 2007). Building on this definition, we suggest that programs further define curriculum as an underlying support or a means by which information can be classified and organized, leading

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us to embrace the notion of a curriculum framework. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate to the reader how a curriculum framework can be a dynamic system that serves as the foundation for high-quality early childhood programs for preschool-age children. See the Division of Early Childhood (2007) paper titled Promoting Positive Outcomes for Children With Disabilities: Recommendations for Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation for a full description of a curriculum framework and illustrations regarding its application to early intervention, preschool-age, and school-age programs.

As described here, a curriculum framework serves as a guide for preschool programs in terms of providers' day-to-day interactions with young children as well as a mechanism for systematically gathering data and documenting child progress. A curriculum framework enables program personnel to (1) promote active engagement and learning, (2) individualize and adapt practices for each child based on current data, (3) provide opportunities for children's learning within daily routines, and (4) ensure collaboration and shared responsibilities among families and professionals (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005).

Illustration of a Curriculum Framework

We use the analogy of an umbrella to illustrate key elements of a curriculum framework. As depicted in Figure 1, the panels of the umbrella represent the four elements of our recommended curriculum framework: (1) assessment, (2) scope and sequence, (3) activities and instruction, and (4) progress monitoring. The acronym ASAP, meaning "as soon as possible," was borrowed in an effort to support educators in understanding and remembering the elements of our recommended curriculum framework.

Just as the fabric of an umbrella is connected, the panels of the curriculum framework are linked together and create a foundation for all program practices. The functional use of an umbrella is dependent on the panels' being intact and without gaps. So too must a curriculum framework not be missing elements to support the provision of high-quality services to young children and their families by identifying (1) children's current abilities, interests/preferences, and needs as well as family resources, pri-

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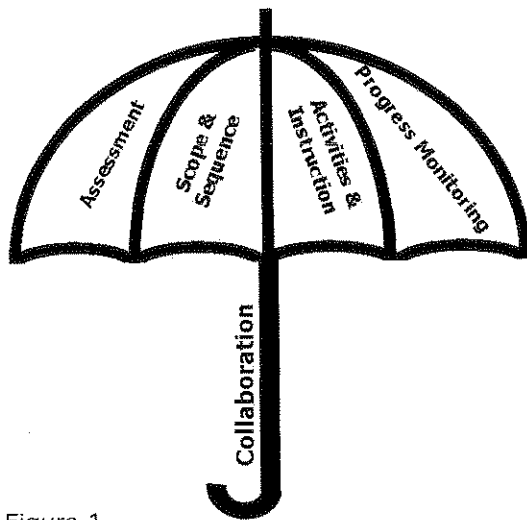


Figure 1
**Illustration of a Curriculum Framework
 Including Four Recommended Elements
 Supported by Collaborative Partnerships**

across the program and improve the possibility that children will achieve intended outcomes.

Furthermore, much in the same way that a metal frame and handle supports an umbrella's panels, so is a curriculum framework supported by collaborative partnerships among team members (Division for Early Childhood, 2007). From initial assessment through implementation of necessary instruction and evaluation of efforts, it is essential that collaborative partnerships are developed and fostered. The process of identifying, implementing, and evaluating a program's curriculum framework is not the responsibility of one individual but must be accomplished by a team. A team should represent the viewpoints of various stakeholders (e.g., family members, teachers/intervention specialists, related service providers, and administrators) and lead to collaborative partnerships that form the needed support for ensuring the curriculum framework is successfully implemented.

Elements of a Curriculum Framework

Assessment

The assessment element of our recommended curriculum framework refers to a process of ongoing observation and documentation of children's performance, their interests and preferences, and family priorities and needs (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Munson, 1997; Grisham-Brown et

alities, and concerns (i.e., assessment); (2) appropriate child outcomes for development and learning (i.e., scope and sequence); (3) supports and instructional strategies to ensure growth (i.e., activities and instruction); and (4) procedures for evaluating and tracking children's development and learning (i.e., progress monitoring). The recommended curriculum framework provides a clear guide for decision making, which will improve consistency

al., 2005; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2005). Implementation of a curriculum framework begins with establishment of each child's baseline or present level of performance through authentic assessment. The process of determining individual developmental and educational needs provides the early childhood education team with a template for setting child and program goals. At this point in the teaching and learning process, the key task for the educational team is to understand the individual children's current skills and abilities, interests, emerging skills, and priority areas requiring various levels and types of additional support.

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The Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005) and the National Association of

School Psychologists (2005) provide early childhood educators with useful guidelines for conducting assessments appropriate for guiding learning activities and developmental interventions. Both organizations emphasize the importance of multiple sources of information, multiple assessment approaches, and the collection of information in multiple settings and across time to yield a comprehensive understanding of young children's skills and needs (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2005). Furthermore, alternative assessment methods and procedures, including transdisciplinary arena assessment, curriculum-based assessment, and play-based assessment, should be considered (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001).

Assessment of young children's current performance across a variety of settings and situations is needed to (1) help teams prioritize needs, (2) guide instructional efforts, and (3) serve as a foundation from which progress and response to intervention can be documented. Primary examples of assessments that can be used as part of collecting information about young children include checklists (e.g., Developmental Checklist Birth to Five; Early Childhood Detection Center, 2006), curriculum-based assessments (e.g., Hawaii Early Learning Profile; Vort Corporation, 1995), and portfolios or work-sampling systems (e.g., The Work Sampling System; Meisels, Jablon, Marsden, Dichtelmiller, & Dorfman, 1994). Defining and comparing the various types of assessment is beyond the scope of this article; however, recommended assessment practice consistently supports the use of authentic assessment practices and increasingly the use of curriculum-based assessments as the "A" element of a curriculum framework (Pretti-Frontczak et al., in press). Curriculum-based assessments (CBAs),

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generally speaking, track children's progress toward mastery of targeted concepts and skills. A major focus of CBAs is on the link between instructional planning and providing team members with specific information about individual children's performance (i.e., what a child knows and is able to do and emerging skills) so that instruction can be focused at an appropriate level for children based on their current level of performance and subsequent progress measured over time.

Scope and Sequence

The scope element of our recommended curriculum framework refers to content found across developmental (e.g., motor, communication, social) and subject or content areas (e.g., mathematics, science). Scope can be thought of as the depth of what will be taught. The scope of the curriculum framework is common across children and is comprehensive. This means that all children (those with and without disabilities) are exposed to the same content, which is derived from several sources including developmental milestones and commonly agreed upon standards or outcomes. Developmental milestones can be found in (1) homemade and commercially available checklists (e.g., Developmental Milestones; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006), (2) resources such as the guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in Early Childhood Programs (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and (3) assessments designed for use with young children (e.g., Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum for Ages 3–5; Trister Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2005). Local, agency, state, and federal standards or outcomes also provide a guide for desired scope or content of what is taught to young children. For example, with the reauthorization of several federal laws related to young children, the development of state standards for preschool-age children and federal child outcomes for young children with disabilities has occurred.

Sequence, in scope and sequence, refers to the order in which skills and concepts from across developmental and content areas are taught. Three types of sequences guide the order in which skills and concepts are taught including developmental sequences, pedagogical sequences, and logical sequences. Many skills and concepts acquired during the early childhood years follow a typical or predictable developmental sequence. For example, many children first learn to pull to a stand, then cruise, then walk with support, and then walk unsupported. Educational teams can rely on developmental milestone charts or other resources (e.g., CBAs) that outline known developmental sequences. Early skills and concepts can also be sequenced based on pedagogical evidence or what is known regarding effective instruction. For example, an educator working on early

literacy skills with preschool children may provide a variety of learning activities to support an understanding of rhyming, which is recognized as an important part of phonological awareness (National Research Council, 1998). As rhyming skills are strengthened, alliteration is presented, followed by segmenting and blending phonemes, and then, when children are ready, letter-sound correspondence. Lastly, teaching various skills and concepts may at times be guided by a logical sequence. Logical sequences are those that may not necessarily follow developmental expectations or pedagogical suggestions but occur through a process by which team members identify a particular need to address. For example, if a child is exhibiting challenging behaviors such as hitting or biting, it may be necessary to first address the challenging behavior before moving forward with instruction on other concepts and skills.

Activities and Instruction

Although activities and instruction are described separately, they cannot be separated in working with young children and their families and thus represent a single element of a curriculum framework. The activities component of the activities and instruction element of our recommended curriculum framework refers to the context in which important concepts and skills are addressed, guided by children's interest during daily routines (Grisham-Brown et al., 2005; Horn, Lieber, Sandall, Schwartz, & Wolery, 2001; Niebling, Roach, & Rahn-Blakeslee, in press). Examples of daily activities include those that are child directed (e.g., free play or center time), routine (e.g., snack or arrival time), or planned (e.g., circle time or art table; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004). Daily activities are designed to integrate concepts and skills from across developmental and content areas. For example, as children build towers with large wooden blocks, they are developing their fine motor skills as they stack the blocks; developing their mathematics skills as they consider spatial relationship, quantities, and configurations of the towers; and communication skills when discussing their creations with peers.

The instruction component of the activities and instruction element refers to practices, actions, and methods used to deliver the content. Quality instruction for young children is grounded in a responsive developmental perspective. A responsive developmental perspective reflects a view of learning in which children create their own knowledge through interactions with the social and physical environment. Quality instruction entails (1) being responsive to the child as his or her needs and personal preferences may change across daily activities (i.e., the intensity of the instruction varies as needs change); (2) understanding the roles

of adults, peers, and the environment as influences on children's learning; (3) creating multiple and varied embedded learning opportunities; and (4) tiering instruction to meet the needs of all young children across common outcomes, targeted needs, and individual goals. Instruction encompassing a responsive developmental perspective is dependent on understanding children's current strengths and skills and using the information about children to create meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Acknowledging the importance of development, the varying needs of children, and the environmental context ensures that each child is able to access what is taking place within the learning environment in an individually appropriate way.

Progress Monitoring

The progress monitoring element of our recommended curriculum framework refers to a recursive feedback loop by which changes in children's performance are documented, summarized, and interpreted over time (Grisham-Brown et al., 2005). Information gained from monitoring children's performance is used for different purposes including (1) evaluating the degree to which common outcomes are being met (e.g., whether children are acquiring critical skills and concepts as expected); (2) as the foundation of a decision-making model designed to inform, modify, and revise instruction; and (3) identifying when a child needs additional or more intensive support or instruction.

Progress monitoring efforts produce both formative and summative data that can be used to inform day-to-day practices as well as guide program-level decisions. Formative data are typically gathered on a daily or weekly schedule and are useful for (1) recording children's progress toward individual or common outcomes, (2) monitoring the effects of intervention, and (3) revising instruction. Early childhood educators use a variety of methods to collect daily or weekly data such as writing anecdotal notes, collecting samples of children's work, completing checklists, and readministering curriculum-based measures. Again, although it is beyond the scope of this article to fully define different progress monitoring strategies, curriculum-based measures (CBMs) have been increasingly recommended given their (a) documented reliability in monitoring children's growth toward critical developmental and content skills and concepts and (b) utility in alerting team members when a child may need more or different amounts or types of instruction. An example of using CBMs for progress monitoring is illustrated by the early literacy preschool Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) that

allow the measurement of early literacy key skills repeatedly over time (e.g., McConnell, Priest, Davis, & McEvoy, 2002).

Summative data are typically gathered on a quarterly or annual schedule and are useful for (1) setting the direction for what to teach individual or groups of children, (2) comparing individual or groups of children's progress toward common outcomes, (3) meeting accountability mandates, and (4) evaluating program effectiveness. Early childhood professionals again use a variety of methods to collect quarterly or annual data such as readministration of CBAs and distribution of surveys or questionnaires to key stakeholders. CBAs are designed to provide a comprehensive description of children's current skills and abilities and can be used to monitor children's progress toward mastery of core content or common outcomes targeted for all children being served in the program.

Identifying, Implementing, and Evaluating Curriculum Frameworks

In addition to providing a description of a curriculum framework with four linked elements, we propose an eight-step iterative process by which team members can identify, implement, and evaluate their program's curriculum framework. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the eight-step process. The recommended steps are designed to engage team members in a process by which they consider the program's curriculum framework elements, ensure its full implementation, and engage in ongoing evaluation activities. Although the process is presented as a series of steps, programs may find that tasks associated with the various steps can be accomplished simultaneously or that revisions to the order of steps may be necessary to best support the efforts of the team.

Step 1 is to ensure an understanding of each of the four elements of a curriculum framework. We have recommended four fundamental and linked elements, including (1) assessment, (2) scope and sequence, (3) activities and instruction, and (4) progress monitoring. After gaining an understanding of the four recommended elements of a curriculum framework, program personnel are ready to form a team (Step 2) of representative stakeholders (e.g., home visitors, service coordinators, classroom teachers, itinerant teachers, family members, community members,

Making the identified curriculum framework visible and usable to all stakeholders leads to clear articulation of the purpose of a program and the quality of services desired and fosters collaborative partnerships to achieve these goals.

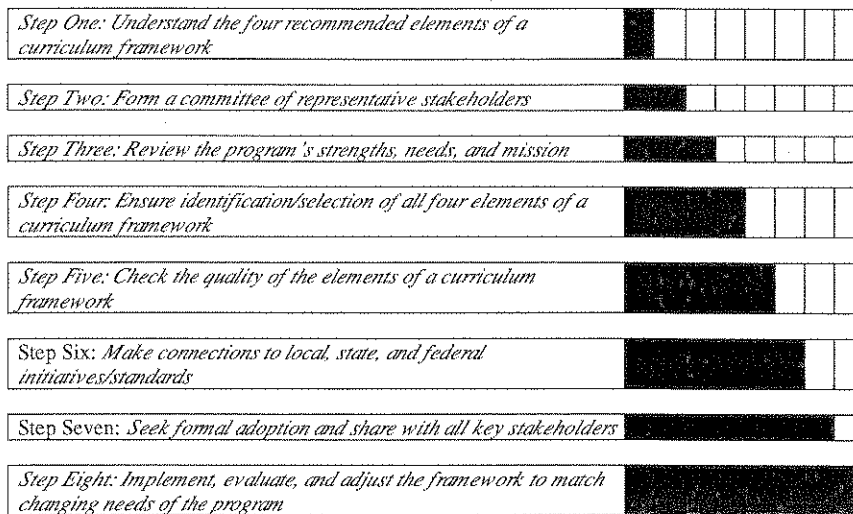
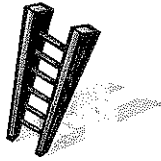


Figure 2
An Eight-Step Process for Identifying, Implementing, and Evaluating an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

related service personnel, and administrators). The team plays an integral role in the multistep process of planning and establishing a quality curriculum framework. The team is charged with getting to know more about the program (Step 3), specifically getting to know more about (1) the program's mission and what defines their program, (b) the population of children and families served, and (c) the needs and strengths of the program's staff. A primary action or task for the team is to identify whether the program has or needs to augment existing practices to ensure that the four recommended elements of a curriculum framework have been identified (Step 4). Step 4 includes reviewing current program practices as well as commercially available products to determine what is or will be commonly used among team members as the four elements of a program's curriculum framework.

After the team has identified the common practices that serve as elements of the program's curriculum framework, they are ready for Step 5, which is to advocate and ensure state-of-the-art practices and compare their chosen or mandated elements to known quality features. For example, they may need to ensure assessments are nonbiased and culturally

relevant and that instructional practices are evidence based, family guided, and developmentally responsive. Next is Step 6, which is designed to help the team make connections between the elements of their curriculum framework and various early childhood mandates and initiatives. For example, as in the opening vignette, educators may be expected to align their curriculum framework to state standards. Following Step 6, it is recommended that the team seek formal adoption of

the four elements of the curriculum framework and make the program's curriculum framework available to a wider audience (Step 7). Making the identified curriculum framework visible and usable to all stakeholders leads to clear articulation of the purpose of a program and the quality of services desired and fosters collaborative partnerships to achieve these goals. Last, Step 8 is designed to ensure that all elements of the curriculum framework are implemented with fidelity and that personnel have the necessary and ongoing professional development and support needed to provide effective services to children and families. Although the eight steps for identifying, implementing, and evaluating a program's curriculum framework are presented as a sequence of steps (see Figure 2), the actual implementation process is likely to be more dynamic and iterative based on the strengths, preferences, and individual variations across teams members and settings.

Summary

Jane and Michelle worked closely with their director, children's family members, and related service providers for several months to identify Kamerville's curriculum framework. Defining the program's curriculum using the ASAP model and following the eight-step process helped the group establish a common vision for their work. Initial meetings focused on revisiting their program's mission and reviewing what the program currently had in place. As the group advanced through the eight steps, they continued to revisit previous decisions as they began to better understand the needs of the program. The biggest challenge the team encountered was reviewing all of the available resources for preschool programs. They found countless books and ideas available for generating programming ideas for young children, making it difficult to determine which resources were right for

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their program. Keeping their program's mission and vision for working with children in mind, however, helped to focus their reviews so that the items selected to define their curriculum framework matched their vision and beliefs about educating young children. Through their collaborative effort, the Kamerville preschool program comprehensively addressed the ASAP elements by adopting a published resource containing the four elements of a curriculum framework and augmenting that with additional resources that allowed them to more effectively address state standards for the outcomes all children are to achieve in their program. In particular, the group determined that the published resource lacked a strong focus in the areas of literacy and mathematics, for which their state had developed early learning content standards. The team found additional resources for math and literacy that were added to their curriculum framework to ensure a comprehensive alignment with their state standards. In the end, both Jane and Michelle felt that their curriculum framework provided them with guidance they need to effectively support the children they serve. The team all agreed that over time, they would need to revisit their curriculum framework to ensure it continued to be a match for their program and community.

Children and families will benefit when an early childhood program has a quality curriculum framework in place to provide a common focus and understanding of how to achieve excellence in service delivery. Regardless of the diversity of the population served, early childhood programs are accountable for demonstrating access, participation, and progress for all children. Consequently, it is imperative that teams broaden their idea of curriculum to include a four-element linked framework that is comprehensive and supports the optimal development of all children. We specifically recommend a well-articulated curriculum framework in which children's current and emerging skills and interests are documented for program planning (i.e., assessment), all important areas of development and learning are addressed (i.e., guided through scope and sequence), and experiences that can accommodate the various needs of all children (i.e., activities and instruction) and procedures for documenting when and why children have achieved targeted outcomes are in place (i.e., progress monitoring). Furthermore, we recognize that differences in how programs conceptualize and define their curriculum frameworks will emerge. An eight-step process was proposed to help guide teams from the initial ideas of the elements of a curriculum framework through more challenging discussions regarding quality, alignment with initiatives, fidelity of implementation, and evaluation over time.

Note

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