

# PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULA CONTENT: BUILDING FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

**This brief** is a summary of the chapter of the same name written by David Whitebread and Yasmin Sitabkhan, in Bendini, Magdalena, and Amanda E. Devercelli, editors. 2022. *Quality Early Learning: Nurturing Children's Potential*. Human Development Perspectives. Washington, DC: World Bank.

## Creating high quality pedagogy and curricula content

Effective curricula and pedagogy are at the heart of high quality early childhood education (ECE). Curricula constitute the basis of both what and how young children are taught, and pedagogy informs how educators organize and facilitate the educational experience in ECE classrooms. Effective curricula are culturally informed, evidence-based and foster emergent literacy and early mathematics skills as well as physical and socio-emotional development. Effective pedagogy supports children to represent and communicate their ideas, engage their naturally playful ways of exploring the world and provide an appropriate mix of cognitive challenge and opportunity for self-regulation. Together, effective curriculum and pedagogy promote emotional security and curiosity, so that children are well-equipped to realize their developmental and learning potential.

## Strategies to develop high quality pedagogy and curricula content

In designing and adapting curricula and pedagogy, cultural norms around the topics of *communicating meaning*, *self-regulation* and *playful learning* should be considered, as these often vary across settings. Implementation of these may also entail adaptation to the local reality by, for example, embedding pedagogical support in curriculum to ensure teachers feel supported in their everyday practice.

**Communicating meaning.** Most children begin to make meaning of their world between the age of 12 to 18 months. As such, a key element in any high quality ECE is to give children the opportunities, materials and support to represent their perceptions and understandings about the world through a range of linguistic, visual and physical media. There is strong evidence that shared and interactive book reading with young children have enhanced vocabulary growth rate and overall oral language development. Similarly, in line with the general principle of scaffolding rather than instructing, building children's interest and attention supports language development much more effectively than "attention-shifting", an approach to switch the child's attention to the adult's own focus of interest.<sup>1</sup>

**Self-regulation.** Children’s self-regulation and early executive function have been shown to predict both short- and long-term academic achievement and emotional well-being more powerfully than any other aspect of children’s development.<sup>2</sup> A positive relationship with the educator is particularly significant if a child is insecurely attached to parents. Educators can achieve this relationship by being present when the child needs help and supportive when the child experiences learning challenges. Furthermore, a considerable body of evidence indicates the pivotal role autonomy plays in supporting children’s motivation and feelings of self-efficacy, which underpin their development as self-regulatory learners.<sup>3</sup> Children’s autonomy should be supported through the provision of choice and encouragement for children to develop their ideas and interests, and approaches that encourage children to talk about and reflect upon their learning.

**Playful learning.** Multiple studies have shown impacts of playful, active learning on children’s executive functioning, self-regulation and language development.<sup>4</sup> Although there are still many debates concerning the definition of play, the multifaceted nature of play is widely accepted. In two reviews drawing together a vast array of play research, five broad types of play have been proposed, with each serving different developmental functions: physical play, play with objects, pretend play, symbolic play and games with play.<sup>5</sup> It is vitally important that educators understand play as a key element in preschool pedagogy, the need for them to provide opportunities for children to engage in free play across the curriculum, and the need for them to introduce new skills and areas of knowledge through guided play activities and games.<sup>6</sup>

## Putting strategies in practice to develop high-quality pedagogy and curriculum

Although curriculum is necessarily organized in subject areas, it is vital that a whole-child approach be considered. To ensure effective uptake of pedagogy, there are implications for curriculum that support teachers in various ways. This section discusses the necessary conditions for implementation which include *diagnose*, *plan for implementation* and *continuous feedback and improvement*.

**Diagnose.** To develop an effective intervention, the first step is to accurately diagnose what is occurring in the classroom. Diagnosing teacher knowledge includes knowledge surveys, interviews and focus groups to better understand what teachers already know about pedagogy in preschool. This diagnosis can be content-specific (for example, early literacy) as well as general, assessing how educators think children learn best in the early years and what types of key skills should be emphasized in the early years. Classroom observations help understand what instruction looks like in ECE classrooms and it also helps to learn what types of materials are available in schools, both for teachers and for students. Reviewing curriculum documents, including teacher guides and student books, will help policymakers understand whether they integrate key principles of pedagogy and how they support teachers in implementing these pedagogies.

**Plan for implementation.** It is important to identify the necessary conditions for implementation and to devise a sequence for these conditions, including potential constraints to anticipate. Together with experts and policymakers in the country, there should be discussion about how to design an intervention, including curriculum materials that respect important elements of pedagogy but also respect and reflect: cultural ways of teaching and interacting, materials availability and teacher knowledge. In some cultures, playfulness is encouraged, both inside and outside of schooling. In others, play is something that occurs outside of school only. Play may be acceptable between adults and children in some places, but acceptable only among children in other places. These types of cultural norms should be taken into account when designing and adapting key pedagogical strategies. That is not to say that play should not be encouraged, but rather that the implementers will need to understand cultural perceptions and attitudes toward play and work to create pedagogy that fits within classroom norms.

**Continuous Feedback and Improvement.** Once curriculum materials have been developed, it is tempting to say that they are “final.” But curriculum documents are continually evolving. It is important to have a system in place that allows for continual improvement of materials. Once materials have been distributed to teachers, there should be routine observations, interviews and teacher reports that provide information on how teachers are using the materials and identify key challenges and successes. Revisions should be made to the materials at regular intervals to address these challenges. When gathering information on how materials are being used, several types of data sources can be useful. First, gather data on how teachers use the materials in the classroom. Through observations by school administrators, district personnel and other relevant actors, data can be gathered on how teachers interpret the materials and the struggles and successes they have. Analysis of these struggles and successes can provide useful and detailed information for revision. Second, talk with teachers to understand their perceptions and suggestions for improvement of the materials. Separate issues that can be resolved by revising materials from issues that may be better targeted by training and other teacher support. Finally, talk with others in the education system, including students, parents, administrators and other support personnel, to understand how their suggestions for improvement can be considered. It is important to have a system in place that allows for continual improvement of materials.

The real strength of high-quality ECE is more generally not the formal curriculum, but the nature and quality of the relationships between the educators and the children in the setting or classroom. The role of the ECE educator is most effectively that of facilitator and guide rather than instructor. Beyond ensuring a responsive and supportive relationship between educator and child, three key elements of high-quality pedagogy support children’s development: supporting children’s spoken and communication skills, supporting children’s ability to self-regulate their cognitive and emotional mental processes and creating opportunities for active learning through play. To ensure all children make a secure start to their school careers, it is important that a whole-child, evidence-based curriculum be provided. It is also vital that ECE educators work with parents to enhance the quality of the home experience and the smooth transition from home to preschool.

# References

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