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## **WHY STANDARDS ARE IMPORTANT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?**

### **Abstract**

Most of the 30 member countries of the OECD – an international organization committed to democratic government and the market economy – became concerned about early care and education after the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) had highlighted the close relationship between school attainment and student social background for a number of countries. Up to now, the educational systems have not been able to compensate for social inequalities. Many experts, many studies done in recent years confirm and indicate that preschool programs as a promising means of establishing equal educational opportunities for children from different social backgrounds. In this paper we are try to determine why standards are important for Early Childhood Education? What is the Teachers Standard important to quality? What are the connections between the Teachers Standard and the other standard such as – Curriculum?

Key words: Early Childhood, Teacher Standard, Integrative Planning.

### **Theory and Research**

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, little scientific attention was given to studying how children grow and develop. In the past 90 years, research has provided a great deal of information about childhood as a separate and distinct stage of life with its own characteristics. The application of this body of knowledge to teaching is called developmentally appropriate practice. A definition of developmentally appropriate was first advanced in a position paper issued by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in 1987 and updated and revised in 1997. Brain research has shown that up to 85 per cent of all the neurological pathways that people acquire develop during the first six years of life (Rutter and Rutter, 1992).

The longitudinal study by Hart and Risley (1995), which found that by the age of 48 months children of parents from a professional background would have heard their parents use five times as many words as children of parents living on welfare benefits, and almost twice as many words as children of parents

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from a working-class background. By the age of four children of parents from a professional background would also have received 560,000 more instances of encouraging than of discouraging feedback, children of working-class parents 100,000 more instances of encouraging than discouraging feedback, and children from parents on welfare 125,000 more instances of discouraging feedback than of encouraging feedback. This means that differences between children from different social backgrounds will have already accrued, both with respect to self-esteem and ability. If no intervention happens these disparities will increase, leading to large differences once students enter primary school.

A survey of over 3500 teachers in the USA found that almost half of all children entering kindergarten had difficulties with transition, problems being reported in such areas as following directions, academic skills, working independently, working in a group and communicating. According to Wylie (1998) there are clearly crucial skills that children will need during the course of their education from primary school onwards, and getting students ready for primary school therefore has to be one of the main goals of pre-school education (Wylie, 1998).

According to NAEYC, developmentally appropriate practice provides children with opportunities to learn and practice newly acquired skills. It offers challenges just beyond the level of their present mastery and it takes place “in the context of a community where children are safe and valued, where their physical needs are met, and where they feel psychologically secure” (Bredekamp & Copple 1997, pp. 14-15). Abraham Maslow described a hierarchy of needs common to all human beings. Maslow’s theory demonstrates that basic needs must be met before children are able to focus on learning. Maslow used the terms "physiological", "safety", "belongingness" and "love", "esteem", "self-actualization" and "self-transcendence" to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through.

Erik Erikson’s theory of the “Eight Stages of Man” identifies a sequence of issues that need to be resolved for healthy development to occur. According to Erikson, each stage builds on the success of earlier stages. The stages children pass through before and during preschool are: trust vs. mistrust (infancy), autonomy vs. shame and doubt (ages 1-3), and initiative vs. guilt (ages 3-5). For each, Erikson describes what adults need to provide in order to help children meet the challenges facing them (Dodge, Colker and Heroman, 2002).

Jean Piaget observed how logical thinking unfolds. Piaget divided development into stages. He showed that young children think differently from old children and that older children think differently from adults. Piaget’s theory identifies four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operations, and formal operations.

Lev Vygotsky uses the term, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), to describe the range of a child’s learning in a given situation. The lower limit of the Zone represents what a child can learn when working independently. The upper limit of the Zone represents what a child can learn by watching and talking to peers and teachers. According to Vygotsky, what children can do with the assistance of others gives

a more accurate picture of their abilities than what they can do alone. Working with others gives children the chance to respond to someone else's examples, suggestions, comments, questions, and actions.

Howard Gardner began researching different kinds of intelligences in the early 1970s realizing that the arts, in particular, had been neglected in our traditional concept of intelligence, he redefined intelligence as "the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural settings" (Brualdi, 2000, p. 1. According Dodge, Colker and Heroman, 2002). Gardner suggests that rather than having one fixed intelligence, people can be intelligent in many different ways. He has identified at least eight such ways: Linguistic/Verbal intelligence, Logical/Mathematical intelligence, Musical/Rhythmic intelligence, Spatial/Visual intelligence, Bodily/Kinesthetic intelligence, Interpersonal intelligence, Intrapersonal intelligence, Naturalist/intelligence.

Sara Smilansky's research focuses on how children learn through play and the relationship of play to future academic success. Smilansky distinguishes four types of play: functional, constructive, dramatic or pretend, and games with rules.

### **What Children Learn**

Recent research confirms that the first five years are particularly important for the development of the child's brain, and the first three years are the most critical in shaping the child's brain architecture. This, have direct impact on how children develop learning skills as well as social and emotional abilities.

Children learn more quickly during their early years than at any other time in life. Recent meta-analyses of these find that preschool education has significant lasting effects on – cognitive abilities, school progress, and social behavior. But, what preschool children learn? Experts have developed standards defining what children should know and be able to do by certain grade levels.

Today, because of the standards movement, the knowledge base in each content area is more systematic (Dodge, Colker and Heroman, 2002). The emphasis on teaching content is greater than in the recent past. These changes have set a new challenge for the preschool teacher – knowing what to teach and how to present it. The Creative Curriculum explains how to teach content in ways that respect the developmental stages of preschool children. The curriculum included:

**Literacy** – vocabulary and language, phonological awareness, letters, words, print, comprehension, books, and other text

**Mathematics** – numbers, patterns and relationships, geometry and spatial awareness, measurement, and data collection, organization, and representation

**Science** – the physical properties of objects, living things, and the earth ant the environment

**Social Studies** – how people live, work, get along with others, shape, and are shaped by their surroundings

**The Arts** – dance, music, dramatic play, visual arts - drawing and painting

**Technology** – tools and their basic operations and uses

**Process Skills** – observing and exploring; problem solving; and connecting, organizing, communicating, and representing information.

### **An Integrative Topic**

The preschool curriculum is rich and varied, constituting the foundation for the child's world of knowledge. Learning is a process of reorganizing existing knowledge and assimilating new knowledge. To enable the child to learn with efficacy, the preschool teacher must plan and organize activities so that they are appropriate for the child's ability, spheres of interest and level of interest at the time the topic is worked on.

Planning an educational experience is based on the principle of focused learning, i.e., on preparing content derived from various disciplines and adapted as an integrative topic that is meaningful for the child.

To plan the integrative topic, the teacher has to select appropriate topics from the content list in the master syllabus for preschoolers. The choice is based on two factors: how well the contents can be adapted to the child's developmental level and the extent of affinity between the content and the planned integrative topic.

Activities should be planned with regard for a range of learning methods: free play, didactic games, conversation and discussion, creativity, physical activity, computer activity, watching television and movies, observing processes and so on. Moreover, the teacher should vary the organizational patterns of learning and treat the integrative topics in various manners: individually, in groups, and with the whole group, and perhaps also including parental participation.

### **The Teacher's Role**

The essence of quality in early childhood services is embodied in the expertise and skills of the staff and in their capacity to build positive relationships with young children. The striking shortage of well-trained personnel in the field today indicates that substantial investments in training, recruiting, compensating, and retaining a high quality workforce must be a top priority.

Researchers have spent decades evaluating the role of formal education and specialized training of early childhood providers in the quality of care that children experience (Burshinal et al. 2002; Zaslow

& Martinez-Beck forthcoming 2005; Howes 1997; Hyson & Biggar 2005; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips 1990; Whitebook & Sakai 2004; Whitehurst 2000, according to NAYEC, 2006).

The common elements that define what all early childhood professionals must know and be able to do to provide children and families quality service include the following:

- Knowing and understanding child development and applying this knowledge in practice
- Observing and assessing children’s behavior and then using information to plan as well as to individualize teaching practices and curriculum
- Establishing and maintaining a safe and healthy environment for children
- Planning and implementing curriculum that advances all areas of children’s learning and development, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive competence in multiple disciplines
- Establishing positive relationships with children
- Establishing and maintaining positive and productive relationships with families
- Supporting the development and learning of individual children
- Recognizing that children are best understood in the context of family, culture, and society.

**Example: Integrative Planning and Approach**

**Topic: The Family**



The three magic words for planning – Why, What and How?

**WHAT** - What are the objectives?; What is the main content I want to teach within the chosen topic?; What is most relevant and suitable for the child's experience, needs and interests?; What are the strategies I should choose?; What are the most significant skills within this topic?

**HOW** - How to plan the time? (For how long will I teach this topic?); How should I build the learning environment in the classroom to support this topic?; How will I evaluate the learning process?

**WHY – should be asked after every what and how question**

Why is this topic relevant to the children?; Why teach it now?

**What are the main relevant concepts?** - Relationships, responsibility, obligations, give and take, empathy/compassion for others.

**What are the main relevant values?** – Consideration, loyalty, respect, helping each other, tradition, knowing and keeping the rules in the family, respect for the aged, the ability to forgive.

**What are the main relevant resources will be used?** – family stories, pictures and photographs, interviews, songs, story books, family treasures, documents, letters, family tree etc.

**What are the main relevant strategies for teaching?** – creating a family corner, bringing photographs of the family members, home visits, cooking, baking, inviting parents/grandparents to come and tell about the family, bringing things from home, dramatic play, and role play, making an album about the family, making a recipe book of favorite recipes etc.

**What are the main relevant skills?** – Thinking skills; Literacy skills; Math skills; Emotional skills; Social skills; Creative skills.

Teaching a topic is a developing sequential process and continues for as long as it holds the children's interest. It should be developed form:

- The known to the unknown
- Concrete to abstract
- Simple to complex
- Near to Far, etc.

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