



# designing a curriculum for ec teachers and caregivers

by Lawrence J. Schweinhart

*This article is written from the perspective of Larry Schweinhart's work with HighScope. It is the intention of the provocations presented here to stimulate discussion and thinking around issues of teachers and caregivers, whatever a program's curriculum might be. If you have ideas or feedback to share, please send it to [www.childcareexchange.com/comments](http://www.childcareexchange.com/comments) for posting on the Exchange web site.*

Early childhood programs are not institutionalized like educational programs for children and youth. Instead, they operate in schools, several types of community agencies, other people's homes, and parents' own homes. Several long-term studies show that high-quality preschool programs can have long-term effects and strong return on investment. However, several other, short-term studies show that most existing pre-

school programs have at best modest effects on children's development.

A central task of university-based early childhood teacher educators is to provide prospective early childhood teachers with coursework towards bachelors' degrees and certification. But these apply mainly to schoolteachers and are not required of most teachers and caregivers in community agencies or private homes or parents in their own homes. Early childhood teacher educators in community colleges and pre- and in-service training programs of all sorts must train adults for these roles as well, beginning in high school. Thus, an early childhood curriculum must not only provide basic principles and practices of teaching and learning that are accessible to caregivers and parents as well as teachers; it must also provide teachers with a fully articulated structure that specifies content objectives consistently with a lifelong curriculum supported by an assessment system. The HighScope Curriculum, for example, serves these two purposes. A national U.S. survey found that in

2001, the country had 20.2 million children under 6 years old who had not yet entered kindergarten (Mulligan et al., 2005). Three-fifths of these children had some type of nonparental care and education arrangement at least weekly: one-third received care and education in a center under various auspices, a proportion that grew steadily from 8% of infants to 65% of four year olds; 16% received care and education from a nonrelative in a home; and 22% received care and education from a relative in a home.

## The need to emulate model programs

Longitudinal research on the effects of early childhood programs shows that they vary greatly in what they can achieve. Three studies show that high-quality preschool programs can have long-term effects and strong return on investment — the HighScope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart et al., 2005), the Carolina Abecedarian Study (Campbell et al., 2002), and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Study (Reynolds



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Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan, since 1975 and has served as its president since 2003. He has directed: The landmark HighScope Perry Preschool Study through age 40, establishing the great human and financial potential of high-quality early childhood programs; The HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study, which shows that child-initiated learning activities are critical to the success of early childhood programs; and studies of the effectiveness of Head Start training and of Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program. He received his Ph.D. in Education from Indiana University in 1975 and has taught elementary school and college courses. He and his wife Sue have two children and five grandchildren.

et al., 2001). At least two of these three studies found positive effects on children's intellectual performance in childhood, school achievement in adolescence, reduced placements in special education, reduced retentions in grades, improved high school graduation rates, reduced arrest rates, and reduced teen pregnancies. All three studies found economic returns that were at least several times as great as the initial program investment. Leading economists regard this evidence as stronger than the evidence for most other public investments (Heckman, 2006).

In contrast, three recent studies of government-sponsored preschool programs in the United States show that typical Head Start and state preschool programs — some of the best-funded early childhood programs in the U.S. today — have no more than modest effects on children's development. These three studies are the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey or FACES (Zill et al., 2003); the Head Start Impact Study (Administration for Children and Families, 2005), and a study of the effects of five state-funded preschool programs (Barnett et al., 2005). Looking at representative samples of children, these studies found small to moderate effects on children's literacy and mathematics skills, less than half as large as the effects of the model programs studied longitudinally.

Effects have been found for these various programs in schools and community agencies in contrast to parents raising children at home or child care in other settings. Further, the studies finding effects have almost all focused on children living in poverty. Few studies have been conducted, hence few effects found, for programs serving children in middle-income families, except for one conducted in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, and Dawson (2005), which found strong program effects on reading and mathematics achievement test scores.

## Generalizing findings

Narrowly defined, the task of university-based early childhood teacher educators is to provide prospective early childhood teachers with coursework towards whatever degree or certification they are seeking. Even then, the match between these degrees and available jobs shapes the content of the coursework. Teachers with bachelors' or masters' degrees will probably focus on teacher certification and jobs in schools not only in pre-kindergarten but also in the elementary grades. Some of them will find teaching jobs in community agencies. But they will serve only a small fraction of young children in child care.

The gap between professional recommendations and government regulations regarding child care in the U.S. is very wide. The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRRA, 2007) recommends that child care center directors have at least a bachelor's degree, but only one state has this requirement; and that child care center teachers have at least a Child Development Associate credential or associate's degree in early childhood education, but 21 states require no education and 28 require only a high school diploma or the equivalent. Various states require teachers to have from 0 to 30 hours of training a year, an average of 12.6 hours, while NACCRRRA recommends that states require that child care center teachers have 24 hours of training a year. As long as the government expects so little of child care teachers, it is difficult for child care directors to insist that more training and professional development is necessary. It is estimated that only 33% of center teachers and 17% of family child care providers have a bachelor's degree or more (Center for the Child Care Workforce and Human Services Policy Center, 2002).

An expansive, inclusive definition of early childhood teacher education is needed, one that goes well beyond coursework in universities to include community colleges and pre- and in-service training programs of all sorts. Because the U.S. states do not require much training or education for child caregivers, some might be tempted to write off the training that they are required to receive as hopelessly inadequate to the task. Put in terms of the longitudinal studies cited above, high-quality early childhood programs with well-trained teachers have the capacity to make an extraordinary contribution to the development of young children. One reasonable response is to work hard to secure high-quality early childhood programs for as many young children as possible. At the same time, it is important to educate people who become home and center caregivers and parents to do the best job possible. Such education should begin in high school if not earlier; because high school, required of all citizens, is the way to reach as many future caregivers and parents as possible.

## Implications for early childhood curriculum

Epstein (1993) identified ingredients of effective early childhood teacher training in a sequence of studies of High-Scope training of trainers programs. For in-service training to be effective, it needs to have consistent trainers; distributive, cumulative learning rather than one-shot workshops; hands-on learning rather than just lectures; opportunities for sharing and reflection among practitioners; and, most importantly, a coherent curriculum that guides practice.

Early childhood curriculum is what early childhood teachers and caregivers do and ought to do and is the content of early childhood teacher training. The research findings pre-

sented here combine to present a strong rationale that an early childhood curriculum should embody the teaching practices of these model programs. But the analysis of early childhood teacher training here also has direct implications for the nature of early childhood curriculum, specifically that it has two distinct audiences: teachers, on the one hand, and caregivers and parents, on the other. Certainly, these two audiences overlap and some parents and caregivers contribute much more to children's development than do some teachers. The point is that the two audiences have different needs and perceptions of what early childhood curriculum is for.

To meet the needs of teachers, an early childhood curriculum needs a fully articulated structure that fits with, and indeed serves as the foundation of, the lifelong educational curriculum. This means it has content objectives in language, literacy, mathematics, science, the arts, socio-emotional development, and physical education. It is supported by psychometrically adequate tools for the assessment of children's learning and curriculum implementation. It specifies basic principles of teaching and learning and teaching practices consistent with these principles.

To meet the needs of caregivers and parents, an early childhood curriculum must be accessible to them regardless of their educational backgrounds. It identifies basic principles of teaching and learning and teaching practices consistent with these principles and does so in a way that can be clearly communicated, at least initially, in a matter of hours, through instruction and coached practice. These principles and practices should apply in homes as well as classrooms, to parents as well as caregivers. They should be accessible to students in high schools and community colleges, to caregivers receiving in-service training, and to parents taking parenting courses.

This is not a proposal for two early childhood curriculum models, but rather for one early childhood curriculum model that meets the needs of two different audiences. An early childhood curriculum needs to fit into the educational system and the parenting/caregiving system. The educational system emphasizes what children must learn and do as they get older. The parenting/caregiving system emphasizes the present needs of children and families

The HighScope Curriculum, for example, was originally designed by teachers and administrators to fit the needs of a public school setting. During the home visits of the HighScope Perry Preschool program, it was adapted for parents. From its beginnings, it was adapted to fit well into Head Start programs. It was extended from infancy to elementary school through various projects funded by foundations and the federal government. It has all the components of a fully articulated early childhood curriculum.

It has also been framed for children's caregivers and parents. HighScope publications and workshops address family child care and caregiving practices for infants and toddlers as well as preschoolers. The curriculum's central focus, on adult-child interaction in which adults respect children and their thinking abilities, is accessible to parents and caregivers as well as teachers. Its emphases on room arrangement and daily routine are accessible to everyone.

Many people who take care of and raise children will never get a degree in child development or early education. Our continuing challenge is to make the basic principles of good child development and early education available to them within the educational opportunities available to them.

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