

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Choosing Quality Early Childhood Curricula

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This article summarizes a study investigating the curricula and features of those curricula used by 497 early childhood educators across one Midwestern state. Curricula were identified and coded for quality features derived from the research, theory, and policy literatures. Results indicated that most educators utilized Creative Curriculum or High Scope (over 60%); however, these and many other curricula did not include all the key quality features. Importantly, most educators were utilizing curricula with no evidence of effectiveness for supporting children's outcomes. Furthermore, limitations in the presence of key curricula features may indicate that curricula generally are not adequately supporting early childhood educators. We conclude with a series of questions for educators and programs to consider when selecting their curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum, early childhood, educators, preschool

INTRODUCTION

Curricula are the foundation of early childhood education from which educators design learning environments and support the development of children (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2003; National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning [NCQTL], 2015). A curriculum is broadly considered to consist of a written plan focused on facilitating children's learning across a variety of in a variety of content domains such as language and literacy, math, science, and social emotional development (Kostelnik et al., 2019; NCQTL, 2015; US Department of Education). Early childhood curricula should be informed by theories and research

about how children learn and develop (Williams, 1999) and often build from children's interests, experiences, and current skills to support learning (Burchinal et al., 2002; Clements et al., 2011; Duncan et al., 2007; Jones, 2012; Jones & Nimmo, 1994; NAEYC, 2009).

Because of the important role of curricula, many state and federal policies require the use of curricula (Quality Compendium, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2010). There is a common understanding that curricula should be chosen locally by educators and programs to meet the needs of their families and schools. Given the importance of curricula and the flexibility in choosing curricula, a growing set of curricula are available to educators and programs. However, less is known about which curricula educators and programs are choosing. More importantly, we do not know the quality of those curricula and if they are adequately supporting educators and facilitating learning for young children.

By looking across the available literature from early childhood professional organizations (e.g., NAEYC), policy documents (e.g., NCQTL), and research studies, several key features of curricula can be identified. These features are presented in Table 1. Although not exhaustive, this list includes features of curricula that are supported by theory, best practice recommendations, and/or empirical research (see Schachter et al., in this publication for more information about the list and source documents). Importantly, these features are critical components of curricula that can guide the planning and enactment of the curricula such that it can support the learning environment, instruction, and children's positive outcomes.

Table 1
Key Features of Quality Curricula

Feature	Definition
Learning Objectives	Curriculum has learning objectives for children
Support for Planning	Curriculum has lesson plans that were tied to learning objectives.
Specified Scope	Curriculum identifies the content that should be learned.
Specified Sequence	Curriculum identifies the order in which content should be addressed.
Assessment	Curriculum contains a corresponding assessment to help understand how children are meeting curricular goals.
Training	Curriculum provides training.
Family Involvement	Curriculum has ways to include home and school connections.
Research Based	Publisher states that the curriculum is supported by research.
Content-specific	Curriculum focuses on developing one content area and skills associated with that content area.
Evidence of effectiveness	Curriculum has been found to have positive effects on children's learning outcomes either through rigorous research identified by What Works Clearing house or other research studies.

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify the curricula used in early childhood classrooms, including Head Start, across one Midwestern state. We were interested in how the reported curricula aligned with the key features of curricula identified in the literature review (Table 1). Participants for this study were 497 educators who completed a background questionnaire as part of a larger investigation of a state-sponsored professional development program. Almost 40% reported that they were working in Head Start-affiliated classrooms and most participants' (74.04%) programs received some type of subsidized funding either through federal or state sources.

Data were collected via survey (a background questionnaire) and summarized. We then conducted a content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify the presence or absence of curriculum features aligned with the existing literature (Table 1) and, as relevant, we coded for how detailed the features were (in order to gauge the level of support the features offered educators in planning and enacting the curriculum).

KEY FINDINGS

Reported Curricula

Participants reported using 35 unique curricula. The most commonly used curriculum was *Creative Curriculum* (Dodge et al., 2002; 53.12%), followed by: *HighScope* (Epstein & Hohmann, 2012; 9.05%), *Handwriting Without Tears/Get Set for School* (Olsen & Hohmann; 2.62%), *Montessori* (Montessori, 2012; 2.21%), *Let's Begin with the Letter People* (Abrams & Company, 1.61%), *The Core Knowledge Preschool Sequence* (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2000; 1.61%), *Everyday Mathematics* (Bell & Bell, 1995; 1.61%), and *Mother Goose Time* (Anonymous, 2015; 1.01%). Educators also reported using 27 other formal curricula, but each was used by four or fewer educators. Twenty-nine educators reported using an educator- or school-created curriculum (5.84%). Additionally, 29 educators reported not using any curriculum in their classrooms (5.84%).

Eighty educators reported using "other" documents not typically considered as curricula. For example, 34 educators reported the state early learning standards as their curriculum (6.84%), and some educators reported an assessment system as their curriculum (AEPS, 5.84%; ATI Galileo, 0.60%). Of the educators who responded with these "other" responses, 52 indicated these as their only curricula. Thus, in total we found that 81 educators did report using any curriculum in their classrooms (16.30%).

Curricula Alignment with Key Features

We examined the alignment of the curricula with the key features from the literature. Table 2 presents alignment of the most frequently reported curricula (those used by at least three educators) with the key features. Although all of the 35 curricula used by educators included some key

features, most only partially aligned with quality features. Importantly, only three curricula had evidence of effectiveness when evaluated in studies that were of sufficient quality to meet US Department of Education standards (What Works Clearinghouse); seven curricula had evidence of effectiveness when examined in additional studies. Less than half of curricula provided lesson plans tied to learning objectives (43.8%) and curricula ranged in specification of learning objectives (15.63% of curricula provided no learning objectives, 34.38% provided broad learning objectives, 31.25% provided somewhat specified objectives, and 18.75% provided highly specified objectives). Provision of a scope and sequence of content was also variable across curricula. Only one third of curricula (34.4%) included or aligned with assessments.

Educators' Use of Key Features

We also examined the features of curricula to which educators had access. As noted previously, most participants reported using *Creative Curriculum* or *HighScope* constituting more than 60% of participants. Importantly there is no evidence that *Creative Curriculum* supports positive outcomes for children, and *HighScope* has not been tested with rigorous studies. Across educators, only 15% were using curricula that had evidence of positive effects for children. When looking at the supports provided by the curricula that educators were using, most educators had curricula with somewhat specified or highly specified learning objectives (62%), but only 10% of educators had curricula that provided lesson plans tied to learning objectives. Most educators used curricula with broad scopes (52.52%) and no sequence (86.35%) but did have curricula that included integrated or aligned assessments (70.38%). Finally, most educators used curricula that provided ways of fostering family involvement (73.11%) and provided training (76%) to support implementation.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Curricula are a critical tool for educators and programs in building the learning environment, implementing instruction, and bolstering positive outcomes for children. Generally, curricula utilized by educators in this study were not fully aligned with key features identified in the literature. Furthermore, over 15% of educators were not using a curriculum at all in their classroom. Thus, our findings demonstrate that educators may not be using curricula that adequately support them in the classroom.

Educators play an important role in developing and implementing the curricula (PCER, 2008; Schachter, 2017). Given the various background experiences of educators in early childhood (Whitebook et al., 2018) the importance of these individual key features may vary based on specific needs. For example, the specification of lesson plans may be more beneficial for less experienced educators who could use the scaffolding for planning and implementing instruction. Similarly, if educators do not have expertise in a specific domain, such as math, provision of a scope and sequence of learning content would be beneficial for ensuring adequate coverage of the content in the curriculum. Thus, educators and programs need to include contextual information as well as the key features of curricula in their decision-making processes.

Based on the extant literature as well as our findings we suggest that educators and programs ask the following questions as they select their classroom curricula:

1. Does this curriculum allow for the generation of a written plan that facilitates children's learning within or across domains such as language and literacy, social emotional development, math, science, and the creative arts?
2. Can the curriculum be linked to learning objectives (such as Head Start or state standards) but is separate from those standards?
3. Does the curriculum provide enough support via lesson plans, scope, and sequence of content, to support individual educators/myself in successful implementation?
4. What evidence is there that this curriculum works for supporting positive outcomes for children (possible resources include: What Works Clearinghouse, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW/Results?filters=.Pre-K> or NCQTL <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/curriculum/consumer-report>)?
5. Would a content-specific curriculum be appropriate for our program/classroom and children?
6. How does this curriculum align with or support our assessment systems in ways that allow for data-based decision making?
7. What are the ways this curriculum supports connections between families and schools?

Table 2.

Alignment of Curricula Used by at Least Three Educators with Key Features

Curriculum	Learning objective	Content-Specific	Lesson Plans			Assessment	Family involvement	Evidence of effects
			and/or Objectives	Scope	Sequence			
The Creative Curriculum	\			\		X	X	
The HighScope Preschool Curriculum	\			\		X	X	\
Handwriting Without Tears/Get Set for School	\		\	X	X	X	X	\
Montessori Method							X	\
Let's Begin with Letter People	\		\	\	\			X
CoreKnowledge Preschool Sequence	X		X	\	\	X	X	
Everyday Mathematics	\	X	X	X	\		X	X
Mother Goose Time Preschool Curriculum	\		X	\	\	X	X	
The Project Approach	\							
SecondStep	\	X	X	X	X	X		
Conscious Discipline	\	X					X	
Read, Play and Learn!	\		X	\	\			
The DLM Early Childhood Express	\		\	X	X	X		X
A Beka Book Homeschool Curriculum	\		X	X	X	X	X	
Opening the World of Learning (OWL)	X		X	\	\		X	\
Read It Again PreK!	\	X	X	X	X			

Note. All of the listed curricula some sort of professional development and stated that they were "research based".

Blank cell = no/none, X = Yes, highly specified, rigorous evidence; \ = somewhat specified, broad, or some evidence

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