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Investigating the Preschool Curriculum

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Introduction

Educating the children of our future is still a top priority today as it was many years ago, when schooling first began as an effort to teach and promote citizenship. Times have changed tremendously since then, as our focus has shifted to preparing children for success in an ever-changing society. These days, children are learning more at a younger age, and it is up to the early childhood teacher to foster this growth. It was only until I started working at a daycare center three years ago that I began to see this for myself. Hearing the teachers talk about putting a lesson plan together made me realize how much thought and effort they put into the process. Daycare facilities do more than just look after children and plan activities to keep them busy while the parents are at work. Rather, they are building the framework for the years of schooling that are to come in a child's life.

My research is a case study investigating the preschool curriculum at a daycare center in Hartford, Connecticut. I chose to look specifically at the preschool curriculum because preschoolers are at a critical age, as they are being prepared to enter the larger schooling system. The curriculum is a key element in their educational foundation, that if not adequately prepared could result in the child falling behind developmentally. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine and analyze the amount of work that goes into constructing the preschool curriculum in order to ensure the steady continuation of the child's developmental growth. Also, I wanted to impress upon others the importance of the preschool curriculum itself. Some people, parents in particular, may be unaware of the fact that preschool teachers are very thoughtful when it comes to planning a curriculum. Thus, I was ultimately interested in learning more about how teachers facilitate the learning process.

Bearing this in mind, I set out to answer two research questions: what measures do preschool teachers take in constructing a rich preschool curriculum; and what challenges do teachers face when preparing their lesson plans? Based on the data I collected, I found that preschool teachers implement a very child-centered approach. By using two curriculum tools, teachers are able to design a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, based on the child's interest, and individualized for each child. However, actually using the two curriculum tools proved to be the most challenging aspect of putting the lesson plan together, often making the process time consuming and confusing. Another challenge the teachers face is the issue of parental involvement and how parents may fail to realize how important the preschool curriculum really is.

Literature Review

The field of educational studies has done extensive research on the preschool curriculum and its necessary components. Again, it is important to stress that such a curriculum is of particular importance because its content must build the framework of education to be developed within the schooling system. This framework is a key factor in measuring a child's success and thus the preschool curriculum is not to be taken lightly. My research at a daycare in Hartford, CT investigates its preschool curriculum, though not directly in terms of its content; rather the focus is on the teachers' perspective of its construction. Examining what measures teachers take in preparing a rich preschool curriculum not only illuminates the significance of the preschool teacher and his/her role in a child's development, but also the significance of the curriculum itself. Diane Trister Dodge (1995) suggests that the appropriate curriculum for children under the age of five is one that focuses on creating a social and physical environment that cultivates the growth and development of each child. Furthermore, she adds that a clear curriculum

structure is one that considers the following: philosophy, goals and objectives, physical environment, the educator's role, and partnerships with families. This sentiment was expressed and expanded upon in other literature as well.

Over the years a number of studies have shown why the preschool curriculum matters in early childhood education. Research suggests that it is important because of its long-term effects. Schweinhart and Weikart (1998) conducted a longitudinal study of 68 young children born in poverty between the ages of three and four years old. Each child was assigned to one of three groups, each group using a different type of curriculum (direct instruction, high/scope curriculum, or the traditional nursery school). Direct instruction is the approach in which the teacher presents activities and the children respond. The High/Scope curriculum is an approach in which the teacher and child plan and initiate activities together. A traditional nursery school approach is when the child initiates activities and the teacher responds to them. The findings of this study suggested that while direct instruction resulted in temporary improvement in academic performance, the child-initiated approach helped children develop their social responsibility and interpersonal skills that appeared to be carried with them into adulthood.

Studies similar to Schweinhart et al. have looked at the impact of curriculum types within the classroom (Weikart & Schweinhart, 1986; Graue, Clements, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004; Marcon, 2002). In the past, curriculum types were identified as either a programmed-learning approach (otherwise known as direct instruction), the open-framework approach (like the High/Scope curriculum), or the child-centered approach (also called the traditional nursery school approach) (Weikart et al., 1986). Today the basic variants of curriculum types are: direct instruction, (teacher directed/child responsive); developmentally responsive (child initiated/teacher responsive); custodial (unplanned and unstructured/unresponsive for teachers or

children); and traditional or nursery school (dialogic/teacher and child initiation) (Graue et al., 2004).

Other research has looked explicitly at curriculum models and their role in early childhood education. A curriculum model can be best thought of as “a conceptual framework and organizational structure for decision making about educational priorities, administrative policies, instructional methods, and evaluation criteria” (Goffin, 2000). Today, the best known curriculum models are the *Creative Curriculum*, the Developmental Interaction Approach (also referred to as the Bank Street Approach), the High/Scope curriculum, and the Montessori method (Goffin, 2000). Epstein, Schweinhart, and McAdoo, (1996), Goffin and Wilson (2001) and Roopnarine and Johnson (2000) describe the aforementioned curriculum models as well as others in their examination of different approaches to early childhood education. According to a survey taken in 2003, many directors of child care centers in the United States reported that they use either the Creative Curriculum or High/Scope. They also listed a number of resources that they use to supplement their curriculum planning, such as the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and an approach called “emergent curriculum” (Trister Dodge, 2004). The emergent curriculum is perhaps most popular among these resources. Although the definition of an emergent curriculum varies, the basic premise is that the curriculum is not predefined. It “emerges” from the child’s interest and is based on observation.

Overall, there is a general consensus that the preschool curriculum should be child-centered and developmentally appropriate (Cassidy, Mims, Rucker, & Boone, 2003; Cassidy & Lancaster, 1993; Seefeldt, 1995; Vartuli & Rohs, 2008). One study examined a preschool classroom of 15 children in terms of kindergarten readiness in North Carolina. Curriculum planning in this classroom was observation based, in which the teacher considered the child’s (or

group's) interest and how he/she could expand this interest in order to increase understanding and learning. Activities were made to accommodate specific skills, and children had the option of requesting activities as well. In some cases, one activity could be repeated or altered to increase the child's experience. The research concluded that children could be ready for kindergarten if they are in an environment that is: "engaging, age-appropriate, and child-centered, includes a curriculum and assessment system that provides for individual differences, and provides knowledgeable teachers who are responsive and capable of facilitating learning" (Cassidy et al., 2003).

A similar study echoed these results. Another North Carolina preschool classroom of 15 children was studied—five of whom were visually impaired. In addition to finding that a developmentally appropriate curriculum is interactive between the child and teacher, it also discredited the notion of the cookbook curriculum planning (listing all of the contents that must be included in the curriculum, like the ingredients of a recipe) and the use of themes (Cassidy et al., 1993). The cookbook approach was ineffective in building a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Looking through a curriculum guide for activities created discontinuity in the classroom because teachers did not follow up on previous observations. The curriculum guide was only useful for planning activities *after* making observations of the children because the activities were chosen based on developmental goals and the child's interest. Using themes was not helpful either, since it resulted in a number of separate themes that continued throughout the week. These themes were more likely to take more or less time according to the response of the children (Cassidy et al., 1993). Likewise, other studies have suggested that the preschool curriculum, in addition to following the child's interest, should also be relevant and meaningful (Seefeldt, 1995; Vartuli et al., 2008).

Some research has taken the study of the preschool curriculum a step further by suggesting the types of questions teachers should be asking themselves when preparing the curriculum. In her study of the professional teacher, some of the questions Lilian G. Katz (1984) advises the teacher to consider are: “Have I provided the right kind and/or quantity of equipment for children this age, background, and culture? Are there enough suitable alternative activities? Is the curriculum sufficiently appropriate and challenging for children?” In a similar fashion, Cassidy, Myers, and Benion (1987) recommended that teachers ask themselves: 1) What is the developmental level of the child or group of children? 2) What is the next step for the child or group of children? 3) Why is this step important? 4) How do we help the child or group take the next step?

Other literature talks about a recent movement towards developing a professional learning community. The idea of a professional learning community is one in which teachers (and administrators) are united in their commitment to student learning (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). According to Richard DuFour (2004), “to create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for the results” (p. 1). The concept of the professional learning community requires hard work and commitment on the part of the teachers in order for students to attain higher levels of achievement.

As for the directors of child care centers, Diane Trister Dodge (2004) advised them to consider their specific program situations when making decisions about curriculum models and appropriate approaches. She recommends that directors examine: the vision/mission of the program; the philosophical beliefs held by the program; mandates/requirements the program

must meet; the experience and stability of the staff; time that can be allocated for staff development; and the resources available to support curriculum implementation.

The existing literature on the preschool curriculum is important because it provides the context that informed my research. It also illustrates why the preschool curriculum is important and what elements should go into it. My study moves beyond the previous works of abstract concepts and look more closely at the measures teachers take in constructing the preschool curriculum as well as the challenges they face in creating the curriculum. Looking at the preschool curriculum from the teachers' perspective is an area of research that is currently lacking. It is my sincere hope that my findings will give more insight into the amount of work that goes into curriculum construction, generate more ideas on the topic, and bring about suggestions for the future.

Methodology

Since the focus of this study was on exploring the measures taken to construct a preschool curriculum and learning from the teachers' perspective, my methods consisted of doing qualitative research. In particular, I conducted formal interviews and classroom observations. The interviews and observations were also supplemented by a few informal conversations as well. The site of my study was Daycare Discovery, where I spent about six weeks collecting data. Discovery Daycare is a child center in Hartford, CT that serves children from the ages of six weeks to five years old. It is open to all members of the community, which allows the center to care for a diverse group of children. Discovery Daycare has two preschool classrooms in which 21 children are now enrolled. For purposes of confidentiality, all of the names used throughout this study, including the name of the daycare and the teachers, are pseudonyms.

I conducted three formal interviews, one interview with each of the lead teachers from the two preschool classrooms and a joint interview with the director and head teacher of the daycare. Each interview lasted from 35-45 minutes. Elaine White was the lead teacher of the Brown Bear classroom. She has 13 years of experience working in early childhood education and had been with Discovery Daycare for three years at the time of the study. Shortly after I began my research, Mrs. White had decided that she would no longer be working at Discovery Daycare. This decision had a minor affect on my study, as I was no longer able to work with her. However, Mrs. White's assistants were very helpful in the final weeks of my data collection as well as the other lead preschool teacher, Mrs. Fields. Mallory Fields is the lead teacher of the Panda Bear classroom. She has 10 years of experience in the field and has been working with Discovery Daycare for over a year now. Theresa Stone is the head teacher of the center. She has about seven years of experience, six of which she has spent at Discovery Daycare. The director of the daycare is Brenda Jennings. Like Mrs. Fields, she has been at Discovery Daycare for about a year now, with 19 years of experience in the field. All four teachers have worked with the different age groups, from infants up to preschoolers.

The purpose of these interviews were to get the teachers' perspective on how they put together the preschool curriculum. Questions were aimed at getting to know where the teachers get their ideas, what areas of development do they focus on, in what ways do they cater to a particular child's needs, and other questions of that nature. Also, questions were aimed at learning about what challenges teachers face in constructing the curriculum. The purpose of the interview with the director and head teacher of the center was to get their perspective on what is expected of the curriculum and the staff that is preparing it.

Observations were conducted in the two preschool classrooms to see firsthand how the teachers' lesson plan is executed. I carried out three classroom observations total. Since Mrs. White was no longer working at Discovery Daycare at the time of my observations, and because I had not worked directly with her assistants, I decided to do only one observation in the Brown Bear classroom. My other two observations were conducted in the Panda Bear classroom on two different occasions. Each observation lasted from 45 minutes to an hour long. The observations were an important part of my study because it reinforced some of the information I had gathered during the interviews.

Data and Analysis

After asking the preschool teachers some questions about their careers in early childhood education, I then asked: "What approach do you take in constructing the curriculum?" The teachers replied that they use *Teaching Strategies GOLD* as well as the *Connecticut Preschool Assessment Framework* (PAF). Mrs. White described the two systems as models for constructing the curriculum based on the observations teachers have made of the children in the classroom. Mrs. Fields added that their method is very hands-on and cohesive between teacher and child. *Teaching Strategies GOLD* evolved from the *Creative Curriculum*, which is a curriculum for programs serving children from birth to age five. On the other hand, the *Connecticut Preschool Assessment Framework* was created to serve as a companion to the *Connecticut Preschool Curriculum Framework* (PCF). PCF is a curriculum guide that serves only 3- to 4-year-old children.

As Mrs. White duly noted, both programs are assessment tools based on observations. Each one has over 30 indicators that teachers can assess children on in various areas. *Teaching Strategies GOLD* is made up of levels 0 through 8, and children can fall anywhere within this

range based on developmental needs. It is a seamless system that keeps a running record of observations and assessments from when a child is an infant all the way up to kindergarten. The *Preschool Assessment Framework* consists of four domains: cognitive, creative, physical, and social-emotional. There are four levels (also referred to as benchmarks) in each domain, and a child is either emerging or mastered in each level. If a child is mastered in level 1, activities are geared toward moving that child up to a level 2. PAF is designed exclusively for preschool, with the goal being that the child is in the third or fourth benchmark by the time they leave the center. Discovery Daycare has always used *Creative Curriculum*, but it wasn't until last year that they started using the *Preschool Assessment Framework*, since all school readiness programs in the city of Hartford are required to use it. I found it interesting that both preschool teachers cited the curriculum tools as their approach to curriculum planning, rather than discussing an approach that shows how the child relates to the planning process. But as the interviews continued, they gave more details of how the curriculum tools fit into lesson planning.

The Curriculum Planning Process

As the director of Discovery Daycare, Mrs. Jennings oversees the entire process to make sure that classrooms are following the curriculum, which means doing observations for each child, entering their assessment data, and using the curriculum informational observations to plan and individualize for each child. She stresses the importance of curriculum planning as:

"It is just not that we put out play dough on the table and it's for all children. Then there is no purpose to it. It is really that intentionally teaching with the activities. What we are doing? Why are we putting it out; and why is it important for that individual child?"¹

Observation and assessment are the backbone of the preschool curriculum. As Mrs. Jennings noted, the first step in the process of curriculum planning is doing the observations. The two preschool teachers, Mrs. White and Mrs. Fields, along with their assistants, make observations

¹ Interview: Mrs. Jennings & Mrs. Stone 11/03/2010

for each child throughout the course of the week. Since there are over 30 indicators of development to make observations of, the teachers simplify the process by focusing on two benchmarks from PAF a week. The teachers make three observations per benchmark, making a total of six observations a week for each child. All observations are then recorded in *Teaching Strategies GOLD*. Of equal importance to the preschool curriculum is the concept of individualization. In order to individualize the curriculum to meet the specific needs of the children, the teachers will pick four students as their focus for the week. However, they make sure that these four children are on different levels developmentally. This is done so that the curriculum is tailored to the needs of those four children, yet simultaneously designed to apply to the classroom as a whole. For instance, the two benchmarks chosen for the week could be Physical 2 and Cognitive 4, which is using coordinated small-muscle movements and recognizing and making patterns, respectively. The four students chosen will fall on different levels within these two benchmarks, the lowest being level 1 and the highest is level 4. Thus, in essence, every child in the classroom is being represented within the sample of the four children, and will benefit one way or another from the lesson.

It is during the “structured play time” that the curriculum is implemented. This time of the day only lasts for about 45 minutes to an hour between 10 a.m. and 12 p.m. The rest of the day is devoted to free play, in which children can choose any toy or activity in the classroom to play with. Teachers also have “group time” with the children, a time where the teachers and children read books, sing songs, and have short discussions. The preschool classrooms always have group time in the morning right after free play and sometimes in the afternoon. Group time can be considered as part of the structured play time. Also, if the weather is permitting, children

may go outside and play on the playground or take a walk. Sometimes the teachers will plan an activity for this time of the day as well.

Activities for the curriculum come from a variety of sources. Both preschool teachers said that they search through *Teaching Strategies GOLD* online, which has a format called the Sandbox that allows them to brainstorm and play around with different activities that could be useful in the classroom. They also include the input of their team members. Mrs. White added that she utilizes the suggestions of other teachers and reflects back on past experiences for idea as well. Mrs. Fields said that she uses her creativity as a tool for lesson planning. Additionally, she also makes use of Google. At times she will search a specific theme and modify it, sometimes only using particular aspects of it, or simply drawing on it as inspiration to generate her own original ideas. Mrs. Fields will also touch base with the director sometimes.

The task of putting together one curriculum based on the observations, assessments, and ideas for activities is different for each classroom. The amount of time it actually takes to put together is hard to quantify. Recently, planning time has been built into their schedules so that each teacher has a half hour to work on their lesson plans. Since the teachers have said that they do not have enough time for curriculum planning, the built in planning time has been quite successful thus far. Mrs. Fields says that she starts her lesson planning on Tuesday with her staff and spends about an hour on brainstorming. The next day she does the bulk of her lesson planning, which takes about an hour or an hour and a half. So she estimates that she spends about two hours total on curriculum planning. Mrs. White takes a different approach. She meets with her staff members separately and then she meets with them jointly to see their frame of thought. Usually the lesson is completed by Thursday and it is put into the computer on Friday. So Mrs. White says it takes about a week for her to put a lesson plan together.

What is Most Important?

Interestingly, when I asked the teachers and director what they thought was the most important aspect of the curriculum and why, their responses all revolved around the idea of an individualized child-centered approach. Lending her perspective as a teacher, Mrs. Stone thought the fact that it is an emergent curriculum is the most important aspect. She described this as meaning: "...we are observing the children and creating all of our activities and goals for them according to that. It is the foundation, the building blocks of it."² Mrs. Fields gave a similar answer to Mrs. Stone. She believed that the benchmarks were the most important aspect because the observations are based on the two benchmarks chosen for the week. The detailed and objective observations teachers record specifically look at what each child is interested in, his/her abilities, and what he/she is lacking. Ultimately, Mrs. Stone and Mrs. Fields emphasize the importance of the observations and benchmarks because of its direct relationship to the child. Mrs. Jennings expands on this concept by adding that the curriculum must also be both meaningful and purposeful for the child. As she explained it:

"...it is really that intentionality. You know, getting to look at, why is that activity out and then are the children really utilizing it. Is it of interest to them?"

... we may put in an activity about the beach. But unless our children have actually been to the beach, that is meaningless information to them.

... I like to take them [the teachers] out of that box and ask them those questions. Why is it that you have trucks out in the block area? What is your purpose? What is your outcome? Well, all of the children like the trucks. Yup, that's an interest area. But why are they there? Are we talking about roads and geography and maps and things; or are we relating it to the construction that we saw when we went on the walk today?"³

Likewise, Mrs. White adds that making sure the curriculum is developmentally appropriate and meeting the needs of the children is most important. She reasoned that a lesson plan that is of no

² Interview: Mrs. Jennings & Mrs. Stone 11/03/2010

³ Interview: Mrs. Jennings & Mrs. Stone 11/03/2010

interest to the child will result in the child not receiving any knowledge. Furthermore, they will lack the attention span needed to get through the lesson and then there will be chaos. Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. White emphasized other aspects of the child-centered approach: building on the child's interest and being developmentally appropriate. Despite their different responses to the question, the theme that emerges is one of an individualized child-centered approach. Everything revolves around the child, with each activity being well-thought out and serving a purpose. Their approach to constructing the preschool curriculum and even terms they use to discuss the important aspects of curriculum planning directly relates to the literature on early childhood education. Scholars such as Cassidy, Mims, Rucker and Boone (2003) and Vartuli and Rohs (2008) encourage preschool teachers to create an environment and curriculum that is based on the child's interest, developmentally appropriate, relevant and meaningful. It is clear that the preschool teachers work hard to put this type of approach into practice.

The other theme that was represented in the teachers' responses was the idea of a professional community and communal curriculum planning. As previously mentioned, the curriculum planning process is different for each classroom. Despite their differences in lesson planning, both teachers noted the value of teamwork. Mrs. Fields said, "A big thing that I like to build myself from is team building. It is never just me with a lesson plan. It is always a team effort."⁴ This sentiment was echoed by Mrs. Jennings, who commented that while she holds the lead teacher ultimately responsible for the supervision of getting the curriculum done, she said that it is a joint effort to make sure that all of the teachers are on the same page. Additionally, Mrs. White believed that communication between the teachers was essential to preparing a good lesson. The reason for this is:

⁴ Interview: Mrs. Fields 10/22/2010

“Because sometimes we would then plan the lesson according to our, I call it, drive-by communications. It doesn’t help for the lesson and the lesson...the curriculum would seem...planned by many different people and there won’t be any commonality to it.”⁵

The fact that the teachers highlighted the professional community and communal aspect of curriculum planning as essential to the process is important to note since it is often thought of a solitary activity in teachers’ work. But recent literature in the field of education encourages this culture of collaboration in order for the student to attain higher levels of achievement (DuFour, 2004).

Challenges and Improvements

When I asked the teachers about the challenging aspects of building the curriculum, most of them expressed concern over the two curriculum tools. *Teaching Strategies GOLD* and the *Preschool Assessment Framework* create two tensions for the preschool teachers. The first tension comes from combining both tools. According to Mrs. Stone, “the fact that the center must use two curriculum tools can be cumbersome sometimes.”⁶ While they are excellent to use for curriculum development and are quite similar to each other, they cannot be meshed together. Each tool can stand alone as an adequate observation and assessment guide. Moreover, as Mrs. Fields suggested, the teachers are also having problems with representing both curriculum tools in their lesson plans. Right now, *Teaching Strategies GOLD* is used to input observations and comes in handy as an assessment chart to show parents at parent-teacher conferences. It is also a seamless system for the center to use, since all of the observations that are recorded for a child follow his/her up to preschool. Teachers find it helpful to be able to look at these observations of the child’s development over the years. However, it is the *Preschool Assessment Framework* that plays the larger role in curriculum planning. It is used as the primary assessment tool from

⁵ Interview: Mrs. White 10/20/2010

⁶ Interview: Mrs. Jennings & Mrs. Stone 11/03/2010

which teachers chose what benchmarks will be their focus of the week. As I previously mentioned, Discovery Daycare has been using the *Creative Curriculum/Teaching Strategies Gold* for years, but they are mandated to use the *Preschool Assessment Framework*. While it is hard to choose one over the other, it appears that the *Preschool Assessment Framework* informs the curriculum planning process more. In any case, the two curriculum tools are not equally represented in the curriculum, creating a need to find more of a balance between the two.

Having to use both tools to create one curriculum takes a lot of time, and can be confusing. Mrs. Jennings is aware that it is very time consuming and confusing for the staff. She mentioned that it is something that she is currently working on with their education consultant. However, Mrs. Jennings said that her main concern was over interrelated reliability, which is the second tension the two curriculum tools create. Her description of what this means was:

*"It is how I perceive what level a child is on, it may not be how you perceive it. So we could be on two totally different planes and a third person could come in and say 'why did you rate that child a level 1, I would have given him a 3.' And then somebody else would come in and give him a level 2. And for people trained in curriculum, they are not trained in that aspect. So it looks very different. So in many cases, we may be underestimating a child's ability just because of where that teacher feels that child is."*⁷

The issue of interrelated reliability makes assessment, an important aspect of curriculum development, more difficult for teachers and both tensions tend to be problematic when trying to plan a curriculum that truly meets the needs of the child.

Conversely, all of the teachers offered different suggestions as to what improvements can or should be made to the curriculum. Mrs. White did not explicitly state any improvements to be made, although she did comment on how challenging it was to use two curriculum models. The preschool teachers, as well as the center as a whole, are still in the process of learning a new

⁷ Interview: Mrs. Jennings & Mrs. Stone 11/03/2010

style of how to put a lesson together. Ultimately, they have been asked to rethink their previous method, which means they are now out of their comfort zone. Mrs. Fields felt that the two curriculum tools covered all the bases, but she also mentioned that she would like to do more assessments using the PAF/PCF. Right now, the only assessment they use is the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), which is a developmental and social-emotional screening for children ranging from 1 month to 5 ½ years of age. The ASQ is used as a general assessment for children when they are first enrolled in the program. However, Mrs. Fields would like an assessment that gauges where the children are developmentally as they get older.

Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Stone both agreed that the tools themselves still need modification. Having been told that the State Department of Education will be doing spot checks for programs that receive school readiness funds, this is of particular importance to Mrs. Jennings. These spot checks will include looking at the lesson plans and being able to identify what individualizations and benchmarks are being used. Their concern is that the curriculum tools may not be capturing all of the critical information needed to individualize the curriculum for each child. For a teacher such as Mrs. Fields, who has a total of 12 children in her classroom, the task of curriculum planning is getting to be more time consuming. The issue now is trying to find the balance where teachers are not spending massive amounts of time working on it and the director is not getting a mile long tool to review. According to Mrs. Stone, “It is always a hard balance to find what is doable for teachers to do and what does not take them away from the children that they are supposed to be teaching.”⁸

Parental Involvement

The one thing that all of the teachers identified as an issue but failed to mention as a challenge or shortcoming was the fact that parents are not as involved in the process as much as

⁸ Interview: Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Stone 11/03/2010

they would like them to be. Out of all of the teachers, Mrs. Fields was the most optimistic about parental involvement. The way she sees it:

“Um.... sometimes, well, all the time for me, even if I see a parent look [at the lesson plan] that makes me feel better ‘cause they are acknowledging...or even if you know, Amanda’s mom [pseudonym] comes up and says, ‘oh I saw that activity you did yesterday, that’s so cool,’ that’s all I need to hear. Because it’s like okay, you actually are reading my daily sheets; you are reading and seeing what we are doing.”

The daily sheet is a paper that gets sent home to parents every day explaining what their child did in school. Information included on the daily sheet consists of what books were read, what songs were sung, group time activities, and the specific activities that their child enjoyed on that day. It also provides a space telling the parents which preschool benchmarks they are working on for the week. Even though Mrs. Fields enjoys that type of feedback, she also says that she would like to see more parents reading the lesson plans and daily sheets, but she also understands that some parents have to go to work. In an informal conversation that I had with Mrs. Fields’ assistant, Nina Raymond, Mrs. Raymond told me that only about three or four parents actually take the time to look at their child’s daily sheet or lesson plan for the week. She also mentioned that parents are told that teachers do observations of their children; however, they may be unaware that observations are done every week.

Mrs. White and Mrs. Stone were quick to say that parents do not realize the amount of work that goes into curriculum planning. Mrs. White discussed the fact that lessons plans are available for the parents to view and that the center has an open door policy for parents who wish to join activities. “They seldom come in,”⁹ she says. She adds that parents do not usually ask questions about the lesson plans, what they consist of or even why they’re doing a specific activity. Mrs. Stone gave a similar response, adding that she tries to convey to parents the amount of work that goes into curriculum planning. Moreover, she admits that sometimes even

⁹ Interview: Mrs. White 10/20/2010

teachers do not realize how much time they are spending mentally preparing their lesson plan, therefore the parents really do not know the extent of their hard work either. Mrs. Jennings offered a different perspective:

“Well, I think it all comes back to a lot of families don’t realize the importance of early childhood and early intervention. With preschool, it’s really preparing them for the fact that we really are preparing them for kindergarten. And that when they leave our program and go into kindergarten, they are already doing assessment in kindergarten within the first days of school, looking at children’s conception about print, their math, their letter identifications. So if our children are leaving our program without a firm foundation in that we are already setting them up to fail within that first month of school.”

Perhaps the bigger issue is that parents are not aware of the responsibility preschool teachers have to their children. Mrs. Jennings noted that not long ago kindergarten was preschool, meaning everything that preschoolers are learning now used to be taught in kindergarten. But academics are being pushed back further in order prepare students for the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and assessments of that nature. So now, children must learn certain materials at an earlier age.

The center has tried to get more parents involved in the curriculum. One way this has been done is by having a Parent Curriculum Night. The purpose of this event is to give parents a background of what the curriculum really is, what the teachers are doing when they plan it, and how it relates to both parent and child. Teachers are encouraging parents to get more involved by asking them to donate items for activities, and looking to provide quick opportunities for interaction, such as doing a puzzle or reading a story in the morning. Also, the center is working on creating Family Involvement events in which the family comes in with an activity to do with their child and then later adding in a developmental component such as discipline.

Engaging the Students

Execution of the lesson plans is different for each classroom. In Mrs. White’s classroom structured play time starts around 11 a.m. and lasts for about 45 minutes. During my one

observation in this classroom, I noted that children are allowed to choose what activity they would like to do. On that particular day their options included: playing with gems/stones, making feather hats, writing, reading, playing on the computer, using the sensory tables (one filled with sand and forks, and the other with purple-colored water), and playing with dominoes. There were only six children at school that day, five of whom kept themselves occupied during the entire 45 minutes. Four of these five children played side by side while the other kept to himself, which made supervision of the activities easy for the teachers. There was only one child the teachers struggled to keep busy. He wandered from one center to the other, spending at most two minutes, with each activity. Other than this particular child, all of the children were engaged in their activities, spending at least 5-10 minutes at an activity before moving to the next one.

Mrs. Fields' structured time is a little bit different. For one, her structured play time lasts for about an hour. The classroom breaks into two groups and does a short group-time consisting of singing songs, reading books, and having an informal conversation. Following group time is one or two activities. I observed Mrs. Field's classroom on two different occasions. During my first visit, the activities after group time consisted of building a story out of clay and later practicing their writing in journals. The activity for the second visit was making gingerbread cookies. Mrs. Fields and her two assistants kept all of the children engaged in their activities. The gingerbread cookie activity was especially popular, as all of the children eagerly awaited their turn to add an ingredient and to mix the batter. Because Mrs. Fields' classroom is bigger (12 children total), it is sometimes more difficult to keep all children engaged at all times. I noticed that one or two children would wander off into another area if they were finished with an activity. However, this did not happen for long. Mrs. Fields' was quick to move on or start another activity to keep the children's interest.

The observations from both classrooms demonstrated the importance to the teachers of creating a curriculum that builds on and keeps the children's interest. If a child was struggling to maintain an activity for more than two minutes, the teachers would step in and offer suggestions as to what else the child could be doing. During my observations, I could see how not planning an activity that keeps the children interested could result in a chaotic classroom. The children who were disinterested in the lesson and wandered around the classroom would be the majority in the classroom rather than the minority.

Conclusion

I began this project wanting to know what measures preschool teachers take in constructing the curriculum and what challenges they faced. My findings reveal that the preschool teachers at Discovery Daycare really try to create the child-centered and developmentally appropriate curriculum that is so pervasive in scholarly literature. The teachers make good use of observations and assessments and individualize activities to meet the needs of the child. One of the challenging aspects of curriculum planning is having to use two curriculum tools in order to put everything together. The other challenge was trying to get parents more involved in the process. Parents are a child's first teacher. Collaborating with the parents and trying to convey the importance of the preschool curriculum is a top priority for the preschool teachers. Because the standards are higher for a child entering kindergarten, teachers are under a lot of pressure to prepare their students. Realizing this, the preschool teachers at Discovery Daycare take great responsibility in their curriculum planning. This includes looking for a way to make the curriculum planning process more manageable while at the same time, enhancing the development of the child.

Further research on this topic could do a comparative study between two or more daycare facilities, examining and assessing the effectiveness of the preschool curriculums against each other as well as the successes and shortcomings of each. Another approach is to do a longitudinal study that follows children from preschool into their elementary school years. This type of study would also look at the effectiveness of the preschool curriculum and whether or not what they learned in preschool prepared them to meet the demands and challenges of elementary school.

I hope that this study served its intended purpose of shedding light on all the hard work preschool teachers put into their lessons and why the preschool curriculum is so important to a child's development. The teaching profession is already looked down on in some respects, partly because the professionals in the field are underpaid. Early childhood teachers may also be overlooked, as people fail to realize the significance of their work. But hopefully as my research demonstrated, we don't give them half the credit that they truly deserve.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Protocol for Preschool Teacher

1. What is your position at the Discovery Daycare?
2. How long have you been working here?
3. How much experience do you have working in early childhood education?
4. Have you worked primarily with preschoolers?
5. How much time do you spend constructing the curriculum for your preschool classroom?
6. What approach do you take in constructing the curriculum (direct instruction, high/scope curriculum, traditional nursery school)? Why?
7. What do you think is the most important aspect of the curriculum? Why?
8. Where do you get your ideas for your classroom activities?
9. Do you repeat activities? How often?
10. Can you tell me about the toys/activities/centers in your classroom?
11. How do you incorporate multicultural education into the curriculum?
12. In what ways do you cater to a child's developmental needs?
13. Are you confident that your classroom is/will be ready for kindergarten?
14. What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of constructing the curriculum?
15. What do you perceive to be some of the successes of your curriculum? Shortcomings?
16. What improvements, if any, do you think should/can be made?
17. How does the curriculum at Discovery Daycare compare with other preschool curriculums?
18. Do you think parents realize the amount of work that goes into curriculum planning?
19. What do you understand to be your role as a preschool teacher?

Interview Protocol for Director and Head Teacher

1. What does your responsibility as the director of Discovery Daycare?
2. How much experience do you have working in early childhood education?
3. What do you understand your role to be in relation to the preschool curriculum? How are you involved in this process?
4. What do you think is the most important aspect of the curriculum?
5. What expectations do you have of the preschool teachers and their curriculum?
6. In what ways do you support the teachers in their curriculum planning?
7. What do you think is the most challenging aspect of constructing the curriculum?
8. What do you perceive to be some of the successes of the preschool curriculum?
Shortcomings?
9. What improvements, if any, should/can be made?
10. Do you think parents realize the amount of work that teachers put into curriculum planning for their students?
11. Can you tell me about the Parent Curriculum Planning Night?
12. Can you tell me a little about PAF and Teaching Strategies Gold?
13. Why did you choose to use these two programs?
14. Are there other programs available for curriculum planning?
15. Would you say that curriculum planning at Discovery Daycare is unique or is it pretty much standard among daycare facilities?

Appendix B: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____ (please print name) hereby consent to my participation in this research project.

This study involves an investigation of the teachers' perspective of the preschool curriculum at the Trinity College Community Child Center. I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. I also understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. Most importantly, I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without any penalty.

The benefit of this project is to provide information about how educators construct, carry out, and understand their work on the preschool curriculum. There is no potential risk involved with this study; however, there is a possibility that the presence of the researcher in the classroom may disrupt the normal classroom routine.

If I have any questions regarding this project or wish to have further information, I am free to contact Stephanie Rucker, (203)-217-0082 or Professor Kathleen Elliott in the Educational Studies Department at Trinity College, (860)-297-5202.

Signature

Date