



## **Introduction: Coping with the Changes in Early Childhood Education Today**

As the twenty-first century has begun, early childhood education has undergone some major changes. These changes have wide-ranging effects on what is happening for young children in child care, preschool, and prekindergarten programs. The directors, staff development specialists, coaches, and mentors involved with these programs have been placed in a very difficult position. How do they effectively help their teaching staff to embrace the changes and yet not give up what they know are best practices for young children? These practices include play-based curricular approaches and authentic assessment methods. In this book, we will explore these issues and provide ideas and strategies for early childhood leaders to help them address these changes and to provide staff development and ongoing support to the teachers in their programs.

In our work as college instructors and consultants, we feel deeply committed to helping those in the field do what is best for young children. We also recognize that change can be a good thing. We think that as a field, we must grow and learn, and continue to develop in order to be relevant and viable. Yet we must remain true to our core beliefs and incorporate them into the change process. We believe that there are many good things happening in relation to early education today. We also have some serious concerns and hear those concerns voiced by directors, specialists, teachers, and care providers in our work with them. We recognize that the change process can be difficult and takes time. We hope this book will provide ways to embrace the changes going on in early education that are beneficial to children, and to resist and oppose those that are not in their best interests. This book is for those in leadership as staff development specialists and program directors who share our commitment and concerns.

## The Changes in Early Education Today

What's in the mix then? What are the primary changes we see happening in early education? We see the following six changes as having an impact at this time:

1. The general public is seeing the benefits of early education.
2. Early learning standards have been developed by most U.S. states.
3. NAEYC revised its accreditation requirements.
4. A clear definition of curriculum in early education has not been articulated, resulting in inappropriate and inadequate curricula often being recommended and adopted.
5. Calls for accountability have raised a debate about the best assessment approaches for young children.
6. Early educators have been resistant to change, unsure about the direction in which the above changes were taking the field.

We will elaborate on each of these changes.

### Recognition of the Benefits of Early Education

First and foremost, the general public, politicians, and policymakers have recognized that there are benefits to early education. Hooray! This is good news. Many governors have started initiatives to support PreK programs or to fund all-day kindergarten. Long-term research studies, such as the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al. 2005) and the Carolina Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al. 2001), have received publicity in major newspapers and magazines. Their findings of long-term positive results of preschool interventions have helped fuel the political climate that has placed more emphasis on providing services to young children.

### States Are Developing Learning Standards

This new valuing of preschool education has resulted in the development of learning standards for preschoolers in most states across the nation. This development is within a climate of emphasis on standards in kindergarten through twelfth grade as well. How those early learning standards are used and what impact they have on the practices of early educators may vary from state to state. They can become a helpful tool to identify common expectations across early childhood programs. But among early childhood professionals they

have raised many fears and worries that are finding expression in an increasing number of workshops on this topic in conferences across the country. In session after session, discussions focus around how best to respond to the inappropriate uses of early learning standards and how to be more clear about what the field believes is right for young children. At the NAEYC Professional Development Conference in San Antonio in June of 2006 we heard questions such as:

- Will the recommended practices of planning for play and exploration go by the wayside? Will they be replaced by direct instruction focusing on skills found in the early learning standards?
- Will the individualization that has been so treasured by early educators be replaced by a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning?
- Will authentic assessment be replaced by inappropriate testing or on-demand assessments tied to the early learning standards?

### NAEYC Accreditation Requirements Revised

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has recently revised its requirements for accreditation, including some new language regarding curriculum and assessment. To receive accreditation, programs are expected to have “a written statement of philosophy and use one or more written curricula or curriculum frameworks consistent with its philosophy that address central aspects of child development” (NAEYC 2006). The expectations around assessment endorse authentic assessment procedures but require that programs be ready to clarify their assessment processes. Many early educators welcome more meat and substance to the accreditation requirements so that an accredited program truly does reflect the best practices endorsed by the field. However, many are questioning just what the recommendations regarding curriculum and assessment mean. Must educators buy a published, curricular package? If they have been using an assessment process designed in-house, will that meet the criteria for accreditation? Again, fears and worries are heard from the field.

### Lack of a Clear Definition of Curriculum

With the early learning standards and the accreditation requirements, many early educators perceive that there is now a push for some sort of standardized curriculum for preschoolers. They wonder if they can justify activity times

where children play and investigate with blocks, art materials, dramatic play materials, manipulatives, and sand and water. They fear that the push for meeting standards will require that they engage in more teacher-led group times with a focus on literacy and math skills, and less on providing opportunities for children to develop those skills as well as other concepts and knowledge as they play, participating in self-directed activities with adults as guides and facilitators.

Ultimately, we think the crux of the matter is a lack of a clear definition of curriculum that is just right for preschoolers. Early education is now functioning within a climate of external pressures from policymakers and the public. Both are demanding that learning and standards be the focus of preschool programs. Within that climate, then, early educators are struggling to define preschool curriculum. The criticism, “All they do is play in that program,” still stings. Parents ask whether their child will experience enough academics to be ready for kindergarten and first grade. Policymakers ask for curricular approaches that clearly address the early learning standards developed for the state. Funding agencies expect a formal curriculum to be adopted, assuming that will mean that their money is well spent in supporting a particular program. Early educators who have long supported developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) are at a loss as to how to translate that set of philosophical beliefs into a coherent curricular framework. Publishers are stepping into this vacuum and providing packaged curricula that may address some aspects of the new requirements and expectations. However, some of these packaged curricula are woefully lacking in their adaptability, both to the unique needs of different settings, as well as to the individual needs of each child—two traits long recognized as vital to quality care and education. Instead of responding to the challenge by explaining how their teachers are addressing curriculum as they plan for children’s play and interactions throughout each day, many early childhood leaders are succumbing to the pressures and purchasing inappropriate curricula just to be able to say to funding agencies and policymakers: “*This is what we use.*”

### Questions about Assessment

The increased accountability includes more attention to assessment practices. Again, the changing climate in kindergarten through twelfth grade education has been influential, where testing has become more and more prevalent. This has brought many outside of the field of early education to assume testing will be right for preschoolers as well. The field has responded with position papers and recommendations for authentic assessment methods such as teacher observation, portfolios, and checklists (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2004). But as calls for reliability and validity dominate the debate, driving the need

for large-scale data collection and reporting, the recommended practices of observation and portfolios have been received by some as cumbersome and unscientific. Determining methods for gleaning numerical data from teachers' anecdotal records or portfolios is difficult and labor-intensive. Authentic assessment procedures are sometimes being thrown out for that reason alone as the pressures to measure children's performance can appear overwhelming to many early educators.

## Resistance to Change

Those of us involved in the field of early education are a special group of people. We often describe our jobs as joyful as we revel in the curiosity and enthusiasm of the children and relish their accomplishments. We feel we are giving much-needed services to families and we enjoy the strong relationships that we build with parents and children. In this new climate of standards and accountability, the changes occurring—including the additional paperwork and reporting that are often required—may not appear to some teachers to be in the best interest of children and the teachers resist making changes. The results can vary, from low staff morale to teachers moving slowly in implementing new curricular and assessment practices, all the way to teachers deciding to leave the field completely.

Resistance to change is normal and healthy, in fact, it can become a part of the change process itself. However, when the changes are breaking the spirits of dedicated early childhood professionals and causing them to lose their passion and compromise their beliefs about what is best for young children, something is terribly wrong. We believe strongly that there are ways to embrace the good points about the changes going on in early education today and to redefine them in such a way as to eliminate the negative elements. As a field, we owe it to ourselves and to the children and families we serve to remain committed to our core beliefs and speak out boldly with a clearly articulated message. We want others to see the value of early education and the specific qualities that make it valuable for children, and to see that play-based curricular approaches can address learning standards and be assessed through authentic measures.

## The Focus of This Book

In this book, we will explore in-depth the issue of early learning standards and how they can be integrated into curriculum and assessment practices that are just right for young children. Suggestions for planning and implementing effective staff development sessions will be shared. Ideas for providing

coaching and ongoing support to teachers, as well as dealing with resistance to change, will be offered. We will provide frameworks and tools that will help early educators represent to others the ways in which early education is most beneficial to children. We will address change issues and provide suggestions for dealing with change effectively. And we will provide numerous ideas and strategies for the leaders in the field of early childhood education to help their teaching staffs grow and learn. We hope this book will empower each reader to figure out the best ways to help others adapt to the many changes in early education today and to continue to work on behalf of children each and every day.

Chapter 1 will address the misperception that there is no connection between developmentally appropriate practices and early learning standards. Chapter 2 will focus on the change process and offer management techniques and ideas to help early childhood leaders deal with the changes in the field effectively. In chapter 3 we will share our philosophy regarding staff development strategies. Chapters 4 through 7 will focus on twenty-four staff development activities to help teachers integrate early learning standards and best practices in curriculum and authentic assessment. In Chapter 8, we will provide additional coaching and mentoring strategies to help teachers make changes in their practices for both curriculum and assessment.

We want early education teachers, directors, and administrators to no longer feel defensive or inadequate in responding to inappropriate expectations from policymakers and funding agencies. Rather, we want early childhood professionals to gather together in a beautiful chorus of voices to tell others what we know and believe are the best ways to provide quality education to young children in the U.S. We believe that staff development specialists, program directors, mentors, and coaches have the important task of conducting this chorus of voices! We hope that this book will provide you with many ideas, tips, and strategies to help as you work in your leadership role with teachers, assisting them in embracing the good things in the changes in early education today and resisting the inappropriate ones.

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