**16.1 Selecting Values and Priorities in the Curriculum**

Biological and psychological research, as well as our own observations and common sense, confirms how much the work of families and teachers matters in the early years. We must think carefully about what we are providing in the way of experiences and how we are providing them as we plan the curriculum for the whole child. Which learnings are more important, and which less so?

For example, is it more important that children experience joy and verve when learning or that they learn to sit quietly and not interrupt the teacher? Is it more significant that they speak fluently and spontaneously or that they speak Standard American English? Is it more valuable that they be able to think about problems and feel confident about their ability to solve them or that they be able to pick out all the things in the room that are shaped like squares?

It is not that any of these values are reprehensible or should not receive attention: It *is* a question of deciding which goals should receive *primary* emphasis. The teacher who elects to foster joy and verve is likely to employ a different teaching style from one who believes that quietly paying attention is vital to classroom success.

**Priority 1: Practice Intentional Teaching**

Intentional teachers are mindful of their teaching goals and strategies—ever on the lookout for teachable moments and assessing the effects they have on the children, families, and educational community. Rather than discounting standards and assessment, intentional teachers use them for the betterment of the children and for appropriate planning for the individual learners in their care. Intentional teachers have a sense of purpose and devote careful thought to the curriculum, the educational environment they help to create, and most important, the relationships they nurture within the classroom. Through caring and intentional teaching, the curricular goals that have been suggested throughout this text can be addressed: inclusion of children with disabilities, family involvement, enhancement of the developing five selves, learning standards and assessment, and meeting academic goals.

**16.3 Priority 2: Incorporate Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)**

By now it should be clear that each child’s development is unique. It is important to know where each child fits on the developmental continuum so as to teach at the appropriate level and inspire the child to go just a bit further. In addition to being knowledgeable about typical development, the teacher must use a variety of assessment techniques throughout the year. We need to know which are areas of strength and which are areas where we can help the youngster gain competence. By incorporating DAP in our teaching, we ensure that each child’s needs are considered and met. Whether children are physically disabled, developmentally delayed, or intellectually gifted, whether they are overweight or hyperactive, we are able to provide an educational experience that is suited to their interests and abilities and encourages optimal growth.

In working to revise the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement of developmentally appropriate practice, Copple and Bredekamp ([2008](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib135)) found widespread agreement in the field that the following aspects are fundamental to DAP:

• Curriculum and experiences that actively engage children

• Rich, teacher-supported play

• Integrated curriculum

• Scope for children’s initiative and choice

• Intentional decisions in the organization and timing of learning experiences

• Adapting curriculum and teaching strategies to help individual children make optimal progress (p. 54)

Supporting the child’s active engagement is a primary concept of DAP and the underpinning of emergent curriculum, which will be discussed in further detail. By developing a curriculum that focuses on children as active participants rather than as passive recipients of information from the adult, we enhance their view of themselves as capable and encourage a positive attitude toward school, which is very important for future academic success.

**Priority 3: Develop an Integrated Curriculum That Supports the Five Selves of the Whole Child and Teaches to Multiple Intelligences**

One of the first American educators to propose an integrated curriculum was John Dewey ([1916](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib159)), founder of the progressive education movement. Integrated curriculum is based on the premise that natural human learning does not occur in isolated segments; it spans different learning domains at the same time. Discrete subject matters are not studied one at a time; instead, they are combined and intentionally linked. Language, literacy, social studies, music, art, math, science, physical movement, and other subjects can be combined in curriculum investigations and activities.

Early childhood educators frequently use integrated curriculum. For example, when we read a book that includes counting, in addition to literacy skills, we teach the social skill of listening and answering, basic counting skills, and one-to-one correspondence. In *The Whole Child,* we have proposed that there are five selves of the child, all warranting special attention from the teacher: the physical self, the emotional self, the social self, the cognitive self, and the creative self. Using an integrated approach that combines subject matters—at group time, in learning centers, or in projects—is one of the best ways to ensure that all these areas of development are addressed.

Integrated curriculum also supports Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, which was introduced in [Chapter 15](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/ch15#ch15). The multiple-intelligences theory proposes that individuals have seven types of intelligence, and that teachers should attempt to teach to all of them throughout the curriculum (Gardner, [1983](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib222), [1999](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib223), [2004](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib224)):

1. Linguistic intelligence involves the ability to communicate with spoken and written language.

2. Musical intelligence involves the ability to appreciate, perform, and compose music. Musical intelligence includes paying attention to patterns, pitches, tones, and rhythms.

3. Logical-mathematical intelligence involves the ability to use logic, analyze problems, perform mathematical operations, experiment, and investigate issues scientifically.

4. Spatial intelligence involves perceiving the visual world accurately, performing transformations on the initial perception, and then mentally “seeing” or figuring out the effects.

5. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence involves using the body in a highly differentiated and skilled way for expressive and goal-directed purposes. Use of tools and mechanical abilities are also involved in bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

6. Interpersonal intelligence involves the ability to attend to and understand other people.

7. Intrapersonal intelligence involves the ability to be self-aware and understand one’s own emotions, fears, and motivations. It is our sense of self that informs our behavior and relation to the world.

Priority 4: Find Ways to Encourage Child-Centered Active Learning; Use an Emergent Curriculum Approach

Sometimes novice teachers assume the term emergent means that every idea must emerge from the children and that the curriculum must be entirely unplanned and spontaneous to fulfill the criteria of emerging. However, in this text emergent means that the direction a topic takes develops as the children and the teachers investigate it together—each contributing his or her own ideas and possibilities as they evolve, in somewhat the same way the children and the teachers in Reggio Emilia do. The teachers do make plans in advance and have ideas for possible topics, just as the children do, but as Rinaldi ([1994](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib544)) put it so well, “These plans are viewed as a compass, not a train schedule.”

This image of a curriculum plan serving as a compass indicating direction and intention rather than being a predetermined schedule is particularly useful in the emergent approach. After all, if the curriculum is seen as gradually emerging, it cannot be completely scheduled in advance, but it certainly does require a sense of direction and purpose.



If it’s snowing outside and the children want it to snow inside, provide materials and activities for them to make their ideas come true. In this way, the curriculum is based on the children’s interests.

If we carry the image of a compass a little further, it also clarifies why we, like Loris Malaguzzi ([1992](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib397)), the founder and architect of the Reggio Emilia preprimary schools, prefer the term pathway to the term project in describing the development of a topic: Pathway conveys the sense of a continuing journey, rather than a unit that has a preplanned end or goal in mind from the start. As teachers and children venture down the pathway together, learning stems from the social interaction and collaboration that takes place along the way (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, [1993](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib170), [1998](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib171); Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, [2005](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib220); Hendrick, [1997](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib291), [2004](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib292); Rinaldi, [2002](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib546); Scheinfeld, Haigh, & Scheinfeld, [2008](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib567); Wien, [2008](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib689); Wurm, [2005](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib700)).

As this idea of a collaborative, learning-together approach has gained impetus, interest has also grown (in Reggio Emilia as well as in the United States) in the work of a Russian psychologist named Lev Vygotsky because of his emphasis on the value of collaborative work between the child and a more knowledgeable person. It makes sense to take a moment here to consider some of Vygotsky’s most basic ideas.

Some Basic Concepts of Vygotskian Psychology

During his brief life (he died in 1934 from tuberculosis, at age 37), Vygotsky contributed some insightful ideas about cognitive development and how it takes place. He maintained that language and cognitive ability do not appear automatically as the child passes through landmark stages; rather, they develop in part because of interaction with other people—peers, adults, and even imaginary companions as the child grows. As the title of his book Mind in Society ([1978](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib675)) suggests, the mind develops as the result of society’s action on it. Since mental development cannot be separated from the social context in which it takes place, this theory about children’s mental development is often spoken of as a sociocultural or sociohistorical theory. All this means is that society (and its past development—hence “historical”) and the culture it generates have great influence on what children learn and the means by which they learn it.

Perhaps the most familiar Vygotskian concept is the idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky ([1978](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib675)) defined the ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level [of the child] as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Vygotsky pointed out that with the assistance of a more knowledgeable person, the child can advance closer to the farther edge of her or his potential ability. In other words, there’s a difference between the current or actual level of development and the child’s potential level of development. The possibility of maximum advancement depends on the assistance lent to the learner by a more knowledgeable person—either an adult or another child.

This concept of the ZPD, as it is affectionately called, has encouraged teachers who are striving to put the emergent curriculum into practice to, first, assess a child’s current level of ability and begin there; then, by offering questions and cues, as well as more tangible assistance, the teacher collaborates with the child to extend his or her mental abilities a bit beyond what they were before.

The other aspect of Vygotsky’s theory of particular importance to early childhood teachers is his emphasis on the significance of spoken language as the mediator between the world, the children’s minds, and their ability to express, understand, and explain to other people what they know. Vygotsky theorized that by using the tool of language, children are able to master themselves and gain independence and control of their own behavior and thought. It is certainly true that many of us who work with 2-year-olds have heard examples of their attempts to use language to regulate behavior that support this contention. Who has not witnessed a child of that age say, “No! No! Baby!” while reaching simultaneously for the scissors?—or dealt with a 4-year-old reporting prissily on another’s misdeeds in the sandbox?

A warning concerning the use of language with young children: While acknowledging its indispensable value, teachers must also remember not to substitute it for real experiences. For language to have meaning, it must be tied to the concrete world, and for the world to acquire meaning, the child must have language.

TEACHER TALK

“Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development is one I find very practical. In fact, I use it every day. If I observe a child having difficulty with a task, I’ll tell him to go ask a friend who has more skill to help. That’s the theory of ZPD in action!”

The Reggio Approach

The Reggio approach, which was introduced in [Chapter 1](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/ch1#ch1), is an emergent curriculum approach that has been in use in the preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, since the 1960s. Americans have been studying the Reggio approach since it first landed at the NAEYC national conference in the early 1990s (with one conference presentation!). Since that time, Newsweek magazine has cited the Reggio schools as “the best in the world,” thousands of teachers have taken study tours there, and there is now an entire Reggio track at the annual NAEYC conference with well over 20 presentations each year.

There has been discussion of the Reggio approach throughout The Whole Child, but it has given you only a small taste of a deeply thought-out and philosophical method of teaching. Once teachers witness the full beauty and passion of that city’s educational system for young children, most feel inspired to provide the best learning experiences for our children in U.S. cities as well. It is hoped that you will feel inspired to explore the Reggio approach further as you develop your own set of best practices in teaching. [Figure 16.1](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/ch16lev1sec6#ch16fig1) highlights some of the basic principles that underlie the Reggio Emilia approach.

**Priority 5: Focus on Teaching Happiness and Joy in Learning as Much as Academic Skills**

Take a moment to reflect on what you have learned about young children’s development and learning, and on your role as their teacher. By embarking on a teaching career you have joined the ranks of many educators in history, from John Dewey to Jean Piaget, from Maria Montessori to Loris Malaguzzi, to your favorite teacher in elementary school (hopefully there was at least one!). The work of early childhood educators is valuable and long-lasting; if we do our job well, we will be appreciated and remembered by the children, families, coworkers, and community members with whom our teaching lives intersect.

With an overemphasis on academic achievement and testing comes the temptation to rush children in their development—just as teachers often rush from topic to topic, filling the day with requirements until there is no room for recess. It is helpful to take a pause, breathe deeply, and reflect on the meaning of teaching. What are our basic goals for education? What goals do you have as a teacher? As Noddings ([2006](https://content.ashford.edu/books/Weissman.2537.16.1/sections/bm6#bib484)) points out, a wider goal beyond academics is the foundation of American education:

Some people argue that schools are best organized to accomplish academic goals and that we should charge other institutions with the task of pursuing the physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims that we associate with the whole child....

Those who make this argument have not considered the history of education. Public schools in the United States—as well as schools across different societies and historical eras—were established as much for moral and social reasons as for academic instruction. (p. 2)

Noddings goes on to suggest that happiness be included as one of our basic educational aims: “We incorporate this aim into education not only by helping our students understand the components of happiness but also by making classrooms genuinely happy places” (p. 3).

It is rare today to hear much talk about happiness in the public discourse about education. With a focus on funding and academic performance, the idea of teaching to improve the quality of a human life and creating well-adjusted, happy members of society has gotten lost. It is hoped that *The Whole Child* will prove valuable to you in your teaching career and that you will find enjoyment and happiness along the way.