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AUTHOR Burton, Leon H.
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ABSTRACT

An explicit curriculum is one that has been carefully designed, pilot tested by teachers and students, and then presented or published. An implicit curriculum is one that is crafted within the thinking processes of individual teachers but not written down or published, and therefore not able to be replicated by others. Based upon the assumption that the curriculum approach used in educating young children should be based on goals for guiding their education in a systematic way, this paper addresses the relative value of explicit and implicit curriculum approaches for young children. The paper uses the definition of curriculum from the National Association for the Education of Young Children as a basis for comments regarding explicit and implicit curricula in the following areas: (1) subject area knowledge structures, presenting examples of content frameworks, for mathematics, science and health, and music; (2) sequential learning; and (3) uniformity and consistency of educational experience. The paper concludes by noting that it is the integration of four considerations--the learner, knowledge, personal and social development, and instruction--that determines the quality of educational encounters presented to young children. To over- or under-emphasize any one consideration may produce a flawed curriculum and instructional program. (KB)

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An Explicit or Implicit Curriculum: Which is Better for Young Children?

Leon H. Burton • Professor of Educati0n • University of Hawaii • Curriculum Research and Development Group

1776 University Avenue • Honolulu, HI 96822
Tel. (808) 956-5066 • FAX (808) 956-9486 • email: burton@hawaii.edu

An Explicit or Implicit Curriculum: Which is Better for Young Children?

Among practitioners of early childhood education, the word *curriculum* sometimes evokes responses that range from scorn and disdain to fervor and exuberance. Their responses may hark back to early experiences when they either had (a) a set of curriculum materials that worked extremely well, (b) an unwanted curriculum thrust upon them by an administrator, or (c) no required curriculum, and teachers in schools were left on their own to do whatever felt right to them. Responses such as these have much to do with how educational programs for young children are designed, whether the designs are explicit or implicit.

Early Education Program Goals

Any curriculum approach used in educating young children—be it an explicit or an implicit approach—should be based on the elements or goals believed to be essential for guiding children's education in a systematic way. The goals that follow are a set used in recent years to guide the design of a curriculum program for children in kindergarten and grade one (ages five and six).

A curriculum program should . . .

• *guide the total development of children.* It guides children in developing their intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and aesthetic capacities through experiences in language, social studies, mathematics, science and health, art, music, and movement and physical education.

• *support children in understanding and valuing cultures other than their own.* It guides children in building multicultural awareness and understanding and in working well with children whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds differ from their own.

• *guide children in observing and understanding the world around them.* It guides children in understanding the environment where they live and in learning observation skills that will help them make knowledgeable decisions about caring for the environment into their adult years.

• *help children learn to respect themselves and others.* It guides children in understanding themselves and their own needs, in understanding others' needs, and in working with others in groups small and large.

• *encourage children to use creative imagination to gain knowledge and solve problems.* It cultivates children's creative imagination and guides them in using their knowledge and skills in creative ways to learn new information, solve problems, and produce new results.

• *support children in developing practical skills that relate to real life*. It gives children a variety of learning experiences that help them see relations of school subjects to each other and to real-world events and activities.

• *offer a variety of challenging and interesting ways to learn*. It guides children through a wide range of active, manipulative, playful, exploratory, and creative experiences in environments essential for developing young minds and bodies.

Given that this set of goals—or a similar set—is to guide the design of an educational program for young children, which curriculum approach is more likely to be successful in realizing the goals: an explicit, or an implicit approach?

Explicit and Implicit Approaches

An explicit curriculum is one that has been carefully designed, pilot tested by teachers and students, and then presented or published in the form of curriculum materials for teachers and learners. Since it exists in some form of print, it can be replicated by others. An implicit curriculum is one that is crafted within the thinking processes of individual teachers but not written or published. Since it is not written, it cannot be replicated by others. A determination needs to be made concerning which is of greatest value for teaching and learning: an explicit curriculum, or an implicit curriculum. Which is better for the young children who enroll in our schools, and why is one approach better than the other one?

Let's consider two extreme views held by some about explicit and implicit curriculum programs. The extreme view of an explicit curriculum is that of a control system that restricts the intuition and creative thinking of both teachers and children—a system that dictates what content and activities must be done each day and at specific times. The extreme view of an implicit curriculum is that it is a non-system consisting of an ever-changing *potpourri* of random, non-sequential, and unrelated ideas and activities that teachers and children do when and if they want to do them. Is it possible that some of the elements of both extreme views may have value for guiding the education of young children?

A Definition of Curriculum

Perhaps we should first define "curriculum." A definition of curriculum developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) from their publication titled "Reaching Potentials: Transforming Early Childhood Education" will be used as a basis for comments regarding views some educators hold concerning explicit and implicit curriculum.

A curriculum is an organized framework that delineates the content that children are to learn, the processes through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what teachers do to help children achieve these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur.

Either approach to designing curriculum will impact (a) the selection and organization of *content* for teaching and learning, (b) the selection of *processes* through which children will have encounters with content, (c) what teachers will *do* to guide children's learning, and (d) the selection of *contexts* in which teaching and learning are to occur.

This definition requires that a curriculum be *content based* (traditionally thought of as including knowledge, skills, understandings, dispositions). The seven core subject areas selected for schooling in most countries of the world include language or language arts, social studies, mathematics, science and health, music, art, and movement and physical education. Experts in these content areas draw from the disciplines of knowledge to select content and organize it for presentation in subject areas. They will often create curriculum frameworks to ensure that the content presented to learners will be arranged into chronologies of simple to complex, or concrete to more abstract, so it will be appropriate for the developmental levels of learners. This kind of subject area expertise is not usually found among most early childhood teachers, or even among most teachers at higher educational levels; hence, the need for help from experts. Without a thorough understanding of the selection and organization of content areas, teachers will also have difficulty in selecting appropriate *processes* and methodologies to use in guiding children's learning of content, and in selecting appropriate *contexts* in which to present teaching and learning.

Subject Area Knowledge Structures

Educational research during the past three decades has clearly revealed that learning activities for young children need to be designed to build understanding of the structures of the different subject areas named earlier. As Jerome Bruner stated many years ago, "Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related."

Consider a content framework for mathematics appropriate for children ages five and six developed by experts in learning theory, in mathematics, and in early education. Children who have foundational experiences in this subject will begin to grasp the structure of mathematics. Each area of mathematics shown is presented within the guidelines for what is recognized as developmentally appropriate practice. What is presented here provides a foundation for advancement in understanding mathematics at higher grade levels.

MATHEMATICS

Numbers and Numeration
Number Concepts and Operations
Patterns and Relationships
Space
Measurement
Estimation
Statistics and Probability
Mathematical Reasoning

Next is a content framework for science and health. Again, this was developed by experts in learning theory, in science and health, and in early education. Children who have foundational experiences in this subject area will begin to grasp the structure of science and health.

SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Time
Weather
Sky
Animals
Plants
Food, Nutrition
Observation
Sanitation, Hygiene
Health, Growth
Environment
Transportation
Energy
Locomotion
Construction
Water
Shelter
Clothing
Temperature
Senses

A content framework for music was also developed by experts in learning theory, in music, and in early education. Children who have foundational experiences in this subject area will be prepared to advance into higher levels of understanding and appreciation when listening to, performing, and creating music.

MUSIC

Tone: Pitch, Loudness, Duration, Timbre
Rhythm
Form
Melody
Texture
Harmony
Tonality
Performance, Listening, Composing

Content frameworks have also been designed by experts in language, social studies, art, and movement and physical education.

Especially unique to work in curriculum design is the elevation of personal and social development to the status of a subject area: hence, another knowledge structure for guiding learning. Activities in this area permeate the activities in all seven core subject areas to maintain an ongoing focus on children learning to respect themselves and others. The premise for explicit curriculum design should be . . .

> *a curriculum should guide the personal and social development of learners through practical and enjoyable experiences in language, social studies, mathematics, science and health, music, art, and movement and physical education.*

Jerome Bruner also stated long ago that "the foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form." Personal experiences in curriculum research and development activity during the past thirty-five years offer convincing evidence that Bruner's theory of learning was, and is, acutely on target. It is indeed a wonderful experience to observe young children building understanding of structures of the subject areas they will be studying during higher levels of compulsory education and perhaps beyond.

Sequential Learning

Curriculum designs that ensure sequential learning activities for young children have unique values. Structured learning, as supported earlier, implies that content—knowledge, skills, understandings, dispositions—gained in any subject area at earlier levels, should be linked directly to what is currently being presented, and to what will be presented at higher levels. Moreover, it suggests that such threads of continuity in curriculum design will help learners to recognize the larger picture of educational experience, to see connections. Curriculum designs that have a high degree of randomness, and are non-sequential, often leave learners in a state of quandary. Young children may enjoy learning something at the time it is learned, but when they try to connect it to

previous experience and then with later experience, it will often have far less meaning for them, if they remember it at all. Researchers tell us that unless detail is placed in a structured pattern, it will be rapidly forgotten. This is another reason why content introduced at lower levels should be revisited at each subsequent higher level. Structured, sequential learning programs should be available for all educational levels, and it is important that educators differentiate between what is "useful" for children and what is "ornamental." Ornamentals have value for children, but should not be given primary status and accepted as program essentials.

Important to educating young children are frequent challenges for them to think intuitively and to exercise their creative imagination. This can be done by giving children problems to solve that tempt them into higher stages of development. A degree of stress is needed to stimulate innovative thinking, but accompanying the degree of stress must be sufficient security to offset the anxiety that uncertainty brings.

Some believe that sequential curriculum designs will thwart learners' intuition and stifle creative thinking. Intuitive learners at all levels will sometimes ignore a need for analytical thinking: they will make leaps in understanding and arrive at sound conclusions through natural instincts. But it is interesting to note that intuitive thinking is more likely to proceed from an understanding of structured knowledge, without which a leap would have been impossible. Sequential learning experiences lay a foundation for stimulating intuitive thinking and creative imagination.

A case in point is personal experience in guiding a research and development project to create a kindergarten through grade twelve explicit curriculum program in a specific subject area. As teacher inservice courses were presented and the program was implemented, responses from teachers overwhelmingly revealed that they believed they were far more creative in using an explicit curriculum program than if they had attempted to develop their own curriculum. They reported that the explicit program had stimulated their creative imagination and caused them to *think about* ways to (a) personalize the activities by using methodologies for presenting content that were more familiar to them, (b) adapt the activities to ensure appropriateness for the children, and (c) supplement the program by adding other material of special interest to the children. The teachers were on target: this is the way an explicit curriculum program should be used.

Uniformity and Consistency of Educational Experience

There is more mobility in our world today than ever before. When a family moves to a new location, of great concern should be whether the curriculum presented in the new school will have any similarity at all to the curriculum in the previous school. Many educators believe that there should be a high degree of uniformity and consistency of educational experience to ensure provision of a quality education for every child. Within uniformity and consistency, however, there must be a degree of diversity to make adaptations and accommodate the cultural differences among children. But even this expressed need speaks boldly for an explicit curriculum.

The skills of teachers in our schools—in all countries—exist on a continuum within a range of poor to excellent, and the same is true of all skilled professionals in other fields. In the field of education we sometimes have difficulty acknowledging this, and our children's education is permitted to suffer. Some teachers need more help and guidance than others. The only way teachers as a whole will come closer to providing an equal educational opportunity for every child is to have a curriculum program that guides them in what to present and how it might *best* be presented.

Many in our world believe that every child has a right to participate in a high quality educational program. To achieve this, there must be within each school consistency of educational experience across grade levels, as well as consistency between grade levels. Moreover, there should be a high degree of consistency between schools and school districts as well. Many educational systems have recently adopted sets of content and performance standards that identify what children should know, what they should be able to do, and the dispositions they should develop. To ensure the accomplishment of standards at any level, an explicit curriculum may be the only viable source of hope.

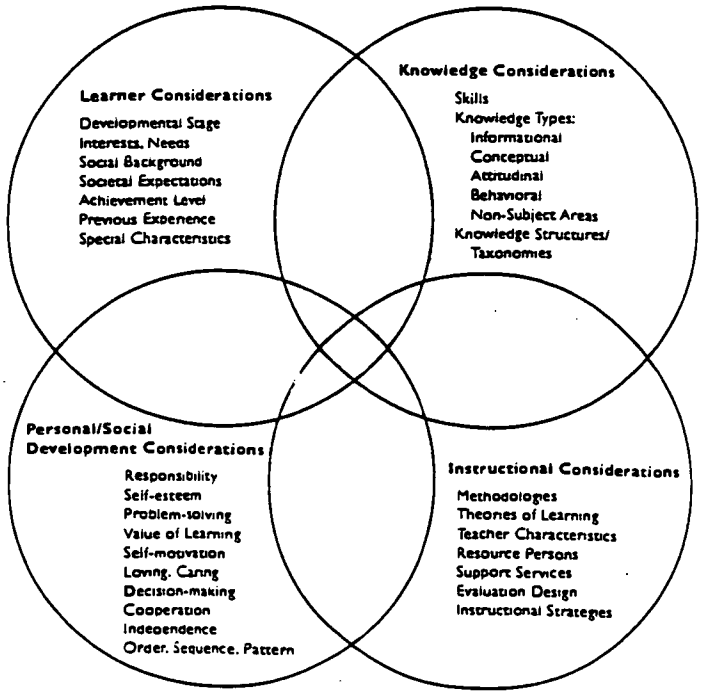
Coda

In the opening section of this paper, this question was posed: "Is it possible that some of the elements of the extreme views of explicit and implicit curriculum approaches may have value for guiding the education of young children?" The answer is "yes."

An explicit curriculum consisting of content frameworks organized to ensure sequential learning can be greatly enhanced by teachers who employ intuition and seek ways to provide related embellishments. Only teachers can make a curriculum program come alive and be appropriate for the children they teach. A final quote from Jerome Bruner. "A theory of instruction seeks to take account of the fact that a curriculum reflects not only the nature of *knowledge* itself, but also the nature of the *knower* and of the *knowledge getting process."*

An explicit curriculum should embrace four major considerations: Learner Considerations, Knowledge Considerations, Personal and Social Development Considerations, and Instructional Considerations. It is the integration of these four considerations that determines the quality of educational encounters we present to our children. To overemphasize or underemphasize one or more of these four, is to run the risk of producing a flawed curriculum and instructional program.

Designing Educational Encounters



Hopefully, the comments offered in this paper will stimulate further thought about explicit and implicit curriculum and instructional programs for our children with a view to providing quality educational experiences for all children in our world.

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Organization/Address: University of Hawaii (CRDG) 1776 University Ave. Honolulu, HI 96822	Telephone: (808) 956-5066 FAX: (808) 956-9486
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