

Curriculum Development and Head Start Teacher Training: In Two Voices

Janey Marquez & Gloria McGinty

Abstract

One of the most important tasks in working with teachers is to help them develop their own abilities to create developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children. This paper reflects on, from two perspectives, the ongoing process of how teachers develop an understanding of how children learn and how that process affects curriculum development and implementation. The dialogue between a teacher trainer and a teacher she has been working with for six years reveals how the process unfolds over time. The teacher trainer and teacher reflect on their experiences in ongoing teacher training and implementation of emergent, project-oriented curriculum.

In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in "Real Life,"* Carol Anne Wein (1995) describes the contradictions of some teachers who appear to "have an allegiance not to a single framework for practice but simultaneously to two contradictory frameworks" (p. xi). She terms these frameworks "developmentally appropriate practice" and "teacher dominion" (p. 3). The framework "teacher dominion" refers to where the locus of power in what occurs in the classroom rests. "Teacher dominion asserts the teacher's authority in all domains except when she explicitly removes it" (p. 5). Wein draws from extensive observation, videotaping, and interviews that she did with five early childhood teachers over the course of a year. She states that the teachers drew from both the frameworks either as "inherited scripts for action" or that they would "surface an action as problematic or inadequate, stop and reflect—and generate something new" to respond to children's behavior or to develop curriculum for activities in their classrooms (p. 10).

In addition to the frameworks, Wein defines "practical knowledge" and "scripts for action" that teachers use to inform their practice. Practical knowledge includes "everything the teacher brings of herself to the moment of teaching—beliefs, attitudes, feelings, reflections, gestures, temperament and personal history" (p. 10). Scripts for action are "repeated patterns of routine practice that teachers use" (p. 12). They develop from doing something that "works successfully to accomplish a teacher need" (p. 13). It becomes an established pattern for accomplishing a task. In *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice*, Margie Carter and Deb Curtis (1994) refer to the need for teachers to examine their own "filters"—the experiences and conditioning they bring to a teaching situation—as well as examining their roles and strategies to see what role they play in their interactions with children.

To "stop and reflect" is an action I have been striving for in work with teachers I have been training for the past several years in a Head Start program in Arizona. This paper is an opportunity to "stop and reflect," to question the established routines and scripts for action, for myself and a teacher who has herself "reflected" and generated something new. We will examine our filters and our role as educators, mine with adults and Gloria McGinty's with children, and try to define what worked and why.

Throughout the paper, we will shift from my voice to Gloria's (in italics) as we attempt to share a dialogue about curriculum development and teacher training.

Staff Training

Our program, Southwest Human Development Head Start, is located in five school districts in the Phoenix area. Our classrooms, for the most part, are on elementary school campuses, in standard classrooms, with some modifications for accommodating pre-school children. Our centers range from one to four classrooms per school, and teachers often share a single classroom in a morning and afternoon class. Each teacher and assistant works with a single class, with 16 to 20 children, depending on classroom space, type of program, and individual class needs. All classrooms serve from 2 to 4 children with special needs, usually for speech and language services, but frequently for services to address more involved needs. Most of our classrooms have a majority of children who speak Spanish as a first language, and at least one of the staff in each classroom speaks Spanish.

We provide ongoing inservice training for our staff in curriculum development, working with special needs and challenging behaviors, and other areas as the need arises. We have been providing training in emergent curriculum and the Project Approach for the past several years. All child development managers have attended Project Approach training in summer institutes. The child development managers are assigned to specific classrooms, and our responsibilities include monitoring for compliance to the Head Start performance standards and local licensing criteria, supervising the instructional staff in terms of attendance, work performance, etc., and helping them develop their teaching technique by making monthly classroom observations and sharing our feedback with them to improve or maintain overall quality of service. We are also looking for carryover from inservice training to the classroom.

Southwest Human Development, our grantee agency, has a commitment to lifelong learning. The agency has been active in developing teacher training committed to sound principles of adult learning. We support training for our staff in a variety of ways: agency seminars, tuition reimbursement, on-site

support for Child Development Associate (CDA) training, and inservice training.

For several years, I have been involved with planning and implementing training in curriculum development for our child development staff. We have experimented with many different approaches:

- We provided training to our teachers and assistants together and separately.
- We tried to determine which teachers were at different developmental levels, to adjust the training to meet their needs.
- We used videotapes, from the Project Approach and of the teachers in their classroom, to give them feedback.
- We used outside trainers on emergent curriculum and materials they had developed—all in the quest for the best ways to help teachers grow in their understanding of developmentally appropriate practice.

We continued to run into the concerns that Wein described. Our teachers could articulate our curriculum philosophy and define developmentally appropriate practice, but when it came to “real life,” they often resorted to their “scripts for action” that sprung from the framework of teacher dominion. However, I have also seen teachers become more developmentally appropriate in their work with children. I have observed them “stop and reflect and develop something new.” And I have spent some time exploring with some of them how this change happens. One teacher, Gloria, agreed to share this process with us in this paper.

Changing Practice

I have been a teacher with Southwest Head Start for 12 years. I came to Head Start from a private nonprofit program. At that time, my training had been in the field of elementary education with some classes in early childhood, as I had started working on my CDA certification. Over the years that I have been with Southwest, I have had many hours of training, but it has taken many years for me to change my way of thinking and of teaching children. I have learned that I can apply the principles of the Project Approach to help me find

positive ways to deal with the child who exhibits difficult behaviors. I can allow a child to take the lead and show me his interests. By implementing the children's ideas and using their knowledge, I can better help them to manage their behavior. As a result, the children have more self-control and I can better manage my class. But learning a different approach and putting it into consistent practice has taken a long time. I understood theoretically that these outcomes could result from implementing the Project Approach, but it took awhile for me to really accept it as a way to teach.

*One of the first times I saw how the Project Approach can help with disruptive behavior was when a child in my class, who was often difficult to work with, became interested in the book *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963). With the help of my manager, I started expanding activities based on the book into our activities. We made a boat. We made masks. We acted the story out and made our own books. Throughout this time, some but not all of the disruptive behaviors diminished. But my practice didn't change overnight. I still wrote my lesson plans around things I wanted to teach—things I felt that children needed to learn or do. But slowly, I was beginning to see a change in the way I developed those plans.*

Around this time, we had a visitor come to my classroom. Because Southwest Head Start was offering training in the Project Approach, Lilian Katz, who was visiting in the Phoenix area, was invited to come speak with the teachers and visit some classrooms. I remember how she came into my classroom and how proud I was to show off my artwork. That is how I used to view the children's projects in my class—as “mine!” Lilian spoke briefly to me about my philosophy, and as a result of that conversation, the way that I taught started to change. She asked me, “How do you apply what your children are interested in into your curriculum?” I stood speechless and stumbled over my words. After she left, I began observing the children in my class more closely and asked more open-ended questions about their interests. Then I began building on their interests by offering materials that reflected their knowledge. On reflection, I feel that this was the turning point. I

could see that by providing activities that followed the children's interest, the interest of just one child in this case, the atmosphere in my class changed.

I was working with Gloria as her managing supervisor and also as a trainer when she began to see these changes take place. Gloria, Beth, one of our speech and language therapists, and I gave a workshop at that time to share some of our insights into how using this type of curriculum would benefit children with speech delay and behavior challenges. But I could still see Gloria struggle with planning and presenting a more project-oriented curriculum. She often reverted to her “scripts for action,” the traditional teacher-directed, clock-oriented, concept-driven curriculum that had been sufficient for so many years. As her manager, and as a trainer, I felt challenged to help her and our other staff grapple with the philosophy of child-centered, emergent, project-oriented curriculum and how to implement it. I looked for the best resources I could find to help them learn how to put these theories into action. I used techniques for teacher training from guides by Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo (1994) and by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis (1994). We purchased copies of *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child-Centered Curriculum* (Curtis & Carter, 1996) and developed a year-long inservice training around it. But I would still go into the classrooms and see teachers acting out those “scripts for action” that had been shaped by “cultural and social experiences and forces, or by internal needs of which they were but dimly or not at all aware” (Berlak & Berlak, 1981, as cited in Wein, 1995, p. 12).

Even though I could see ways that having a curriculum that was more responsive to children's interests could benefit the children, reduce some acting-out behaviors, and make teaching young children more enjoyable, I found it hard to sustain. One of the biggest challenges was maintaining the energy needed to develop and support a project. On days when things just didn't go well, it was easier to go back to a very directed style. It was what I knew best. When I had to expend time and energy dealing with problem behaviors, it was quicker to plan or set out a more teacher-directed activity. If children were sitting down in a small group, my classroom looked to be “under con-

tol.” If my classroom was under control, then I felt more competent. But this strategy didn’t always work, and I came to see that the children’s interests were just as important as my need for all children to be in circle at the same time doing the same thing.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

In our Head Start program, we have a strong commitment to applying constructivist learning theories to our adult education programs as well as our early childhood curriculum. As Elizabeth Jones writes, “teachers learn about teaching and learning by playing the teacher script, observing what happens, and discussing all the possibilities with other teachers. In this process, they come to see themselves as people who know—thereby people capable of making appropriate choices for themselves and for children” (Jones, 1993, p. viii). We understand that “people construct new knowledge by connecting their current understandings and experiences to new information and ideas” (Carter & Curtis, 1994, p. 19). Our instructional staff, those that have been with us for a while, learned and can articulate our curriculum philosophy and the principles of developmentally appropriate practice. But back in the classroom, the implementation of these practices is often missing. Again, Wein (1995) describes this contradiction as the distinction between “knowing-that and knowing-how” (p. 95). She states, “In terms of the ideology of developmentally appropriate practice, we can distinguish between knowing about the practice and having the performance skills to implement it.” Wein describes six interrelated aspects of developmentally appropriate practice that teachers need to be comfortable with, in “our attitude toward it, its value to us, and our motivation to do it” (p. 95). These aspects are:

- Teacher observation of individual children as a basis for curriculum decisions
- Teacher focus on child process in activity
- An understanding of play and teacher roles to extend and support it
- The importance of opportunities for child choices
- The importance of child-initiated activity
- Support for child problem solving (Wein, 1995, p. 96)

As I talked with Janey about these aspects, I thought of an occurrence in my classroom. One day as I was thinking about lesson plans, I heard one of the children talking about how her dad played the harmonica. The child continued to entertain the group on how her dad made this music. So I asked her to invite him to visit our class so she could introduce him and he could play his instrument. Because of this brief activity, my planning took a turn, and I started introducing more instruments to the class. We had a guest come who told a story about music and had the children help with the story using instruments that came from many places. The children made musical instruments, danced to different styles of music, shared music from their homes and cultures, observed a powwow and a marching band, and made books and collages about their favorite music and instruments. As Janey and I talked about this activity, we identified several of the aspects quite easily.

In this story about Gloria’s music project, all six of the aspects for developmentally appropriate practice are present. And as we worked on this paper, I heard her say things like, “through observation, I am more aware of the children’s interest,” or “I can follow the lead of the children,” or “children are curious about objects they see—they want to know more about them and they want to explain to others how they work.” But Gloria is the first to say that she has a fragile grasp on the implementation of developmentally appropriate practice. As I have worked with the instructional staff as a trainer and with the staff that I supervise and monitor, I constantly find teachers who can tell me that children learn best from hands-on activities, and that all children are not interested in the same thing at the same time and have very different attention spans, etc. They know all those things that we would take into consideration as we plan for young children, but everyday I also see teachers waiting for a group of 3- and 4-year-olds to all be sitting quietly, with their hands in their laps, before starting to read a story—or all of them being lined up with their hands behind their backs before going outdoors or to the bathroom.

What are the barriers to the teachers being more capable of sustaining their child-centered, project-

oriented curriculum and having more consistently appropriate classrooms? Elizabeth Jones (1993), in *Growing Teachers: Partnerships in Staff Development*, says that “early childhood staff who appear to lack creativity and motivation”... are “adults with complex lives (who) have pressing needs that leave them little energy to invest in their work beyond its minimum requirements” (p. xiv). Our staff members certainly have many pressing needs. Most are parents, many of them with young children. The teachers who don’t have at least an associate of arts degree are being required to get one by the fall of 2003. All of our assistants are required to take CDA training after one semester of employment and complete a specific number of units each school year. We are experiencing difficulty recruiting new staff, so some are doing extra duties. And there are, it seems, more children who are exhibiting challenging behaviors and more children who are being identified with special needs entering our programs at younger ages. As I asked this question of Gloria, who doesn’t have children, and has a AA degree, she shared the following:

It is very easy for a teacher to return to the old way of teaching, in which every child does the same thing at the same time and is not seen as an individual who enters the classroom with unique ideas and knowledge. When children have challenging behaviors, I can revert to doing more traditional concept activities to fill up time, to give me a way to deal with the problems. I don't have enough time or energy to spend on more engaging themes that require more planning, observation, and attention to the classroom environment, facilitating props, and expanding play. My energy is expended dealing with the disruptive child, and none is available to work on developing a new project. Sometimes I find myself returning to seasonal types of activities due to time constraints and the amount of paperwork I have to do, or because I have a challenging class.

Some teachers feel that the training they receive can be overwhelming when it introduces too many new ideas or too much information at one time. That's why it was helpful to have training in the Project Approach for over two years, so I could

finally understand it and have plenty of opportunity to try out new methods in my classroom. I have some suggestions about training that other teachers have shared with me. Some of them think it's better to have the same training throughout the year the way we did with the Project Approach and emergent curriculum. Others think that allowing them to assist or train new staff might help them solidify their own skills. Some even want other teachers with more experience to help them identify projects and then walk them step by step through them. I also think that the developmental level of the teacher's understanding is important, but teachers with different developmental understanding can help one another. When more seasoned teachers shared what they knew, other teachers gained knowledge from their peers. I know that I have gotten better at being able to see potential projects. One day while I was visiting a friend's classroom, I observed a boy begin to wash a bike. He poured water on the bike and then added sand, commenting, "Boy, is this bike dirty. I need to wash it." I shared what I'd seen with the teacher and suggested that she had the beginning of a project there, that maybe she could expand on the child's interest. The next day I was subbing in that room, and the same child ask for cloth and soap to wash the bike again. This interest was definitely something that could have been expanded into a more involved play theme.

Developing and Implementing Training

In *Training Teachers*, Carter and Curtis (1994) discuss their approach to the problem that Gloria mentioned about training that introduces too much too fast. They choose one or two big ideas and spend time on the topic to give the learner the opportunity to reframe and consolidate his or her knowledge. As much as we try to follow this strategy, it always seems that there is so much more we want to add into the training, because the time available for training is so limited and there is so much we want everyone to know. We need to listen to our staff and to our training mentors. And we need to listen to the words of Elizabeth Jones (1993) who tells us to “have faith in self-fulfilling prophecies—faith that teachers, viewed as interesting and competent by colleagues

worthy of respect, will become more thoughtful about their work, will continue to seek input from others, and will thereby become increasingly empowered as critical thinkers and problem solvers” (p. xiv).

Developing and implementing training is hard work, and similar to what happens with our children in our Head Start program, we may not see the gains right away. Sometimes the apparent lack of change is discouraging and causes us, as trainers and as teachers, to question the efficacy of our work. We have to watch for small changes and bolster them. Time for training is so limited, and there is so much we want to cover, so we succumb to the “temptation to squeeze in as many ideas as we can.” But if we persevere, we can “grow teachers,” and the results are exciting for us as trainers, for the teachers who see educating children as a powerful occupation, and, most of all, for the children. I think Gloria can express it best:

Last year, I noticed two girls in the dramatic play area playing with cameras, posing and taking one another's picture. I pointed them out to a student teacher I had in my class, and we discussed how really involved they had been pretending to take pictures. We decided to find out what they knew about cameras, and we made a web. We were able to provide a camera for every three children in the class. We showed them how to look through the viewfinder and find what they wanted to photograph. They took pictures of one another and things in and outside the classroom. They took pictures of family members. We made a mural of their photos labeled with dictations about what they had photographed. They made a classroom scrapbook. Since then, I have had a lot more ideas about things we can do with cameras. I am planning to take a workshop offered by Polaroid to learn more about different ways to use cameras. I also want to show them more pictures and books of pictures by other photographers and have them learn more about the process of what happens to the film. I can't stop thinking about different things I can do with this project. But I have learned that I must be flexible and follow the children, so things might change. I realize after all this time that if children are learning what they find interesting by initiating the activity, they will be in the circle everyday waiting to find out what happens next.

References

- Carter, M., & Curtis, D. (1994). *Training teachers: A harvest of theory and practice*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (1996). *Reflecting children's lives: A handbook for planning child-centered curriculum*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. (ERIC Document No. ED401038)
- Jones, E. (Ed.). (1993). *Growing teachers: Partnerships in staff development*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (ERIC Document No. ED418812)
- Jones, E., & Nimmo, J. (1994). *Emergent curriculum*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (ERIC Document No. ED382343)
- Sendak, M. (1963). *Where the wild things are*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Wein, C. A. (1995). *Developmentally appropriate practice in "real life": Stories of teacher practical knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press. (ERIC Document No. ED403030)