

Introduction

The preschool years are a time of enormous growth. Preschool children are able to investigate wide-ranging topics, engage in sophisticated social negotiation, and delight in their accomplishments. Children at four and five years of age have specific needs, learning styles and capabilities that must be addressed by early childhood professionals so that children develop to their fullest potential. This policy brief provides an outline of recommended curriculum in order to ensure the implementation of high quality preschool practices in New Mexico PreK programs.

In New Mexico our educational emphasis is on the children's developmental progress toward competence, interdependence, socialization and the integration of content areas. Preschool children and their teacher become an active learning community, connected to the larger community around them. This occurs within the context of relationships as teachers collaborate with families and children toward academic success.

Foundational Concepts. There are three concepts that guide decisions in the early care and education system in New Mexico (Early Learning Plan 2012). These concepts are the "three Rs" on which preschool curriculum is built and enacted in the classroom.

1. First and foremost, children develop within the context of relationships. Curriculum should facilitate relationships that grow and develop among the children, and between children and the adults who care for them and teach them. Professionals work together to build relationships with each other and the families they serve.
2. Curricular decisions respect that childhood is a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world. Early childhood educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for children. Professionals respect the uniqueness of each child.
3. Educators engage in reflective practice to understand deeply the children with whom they work, the educational experiences they plan, and the assessment strategies they utilize. Reflection includes the application of theories related to curricular decisions.

Definition of preschool curriculum. Curriculum in preschool is an organized framework that delineates the content 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. The curriculum is flexible to facilitate adaptation to our multicultural communities and all children, including those with special needs.

How does curriculum decision making work? First the PreK teacher analyzes the expected NM Outcomes and Indicators which serve as our educational aims. Next the teacher uses the NM Early Learning Guidelines to generate a list of the knowledge and skills the children need to develop. Then the teacher learns about individual children; getting to know her students with

ongoing observation and systematic assessment. Finally, through assessment, teachers shape the curriculum, which, in turn, allow children to take optimal advantage of teaching.

The NM PreK curriculum focuses on children as engaged, excited, curious and intensely involved in learning experiences that are meaningful to them. In this manner, the children learn responsibility for their own learning while developing strategies for the future otherwise known as readiness for kindergarten and beyond. As research has demonstrated, “engagement increases the ability of the brain to remember; adrenaline created through emotional involvement activates the amygdala, a part of the brain that decides which information is important enough to retain” (Helm, 2006). Curriculum for PreK children is grounded in reciprocal relationships with caring teachers who provide authentic learning experiences.

This document for New Mexico draws on national recommendations termed “Developmentally Appropriate Practice,” and is supported by research in child development (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2003). Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enabling children to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable. Practices should be appropriate to children’s age and developmental status, attuned to them as unique individuals, and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.

Developmentally appropriate practice does not mean making things easier for children. Rather, it means ensuring that goals and experiences are suited to their learning and development *and* challenging enough to promote their progress and interest. Best practice is based on knowledge—not on assumptions—of how children learn and develop (NAEYC Key Messages 2009, page 1). New Mexico PreK embraces the recommended goal for curriculum to “promote positive outcomes for all young children” (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2003, page 2). By identifying key elements of curriculum, and by integrating the New Mexico PreK Observational Assessment Tools with these elements, PreK teachers will be clear in ways to effectively educate the children in PreK classrooms. Teachers will “...implement curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, [and] comprehensive...” (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2003, page 2).

Principles of Curriculum

Curriculum is focused on the whole child and based on sound research about child development. Preschool curriculum is comprehensive – integrating all domains of development and academic content areas. Subject area content such as mathematics, science, and reading, are offered in age appropriate and meaningful ways.

Curriculum reflects the social and cultural context of children’s development and learning. Preschool professionals recognize, understand, and facilitate a variety of ways for children to express their developmental achievements.

Curriculum is comprehensive by integrating domains of development and academic content areas.

Curriculum and assessment are integrated as teachers observe and document children's performance which informs the next step in teaching and organizing learning opportunities.

Play and investigation serve as the most important and primary modes for learning. As children engage with interesting and provoking materials, teachers interact with them, providing support, asking questions, observing, and offering challenges so that children are learning new skills and concepts and applying and adapting ones that are already established.

Teachers are intentional as they plan for learning that is engaging, interesting and challenging. Teachers individualize instruction as they implement their curricular plans. Teachers engage in reflection with children, families and colleagues as they plan instruction.

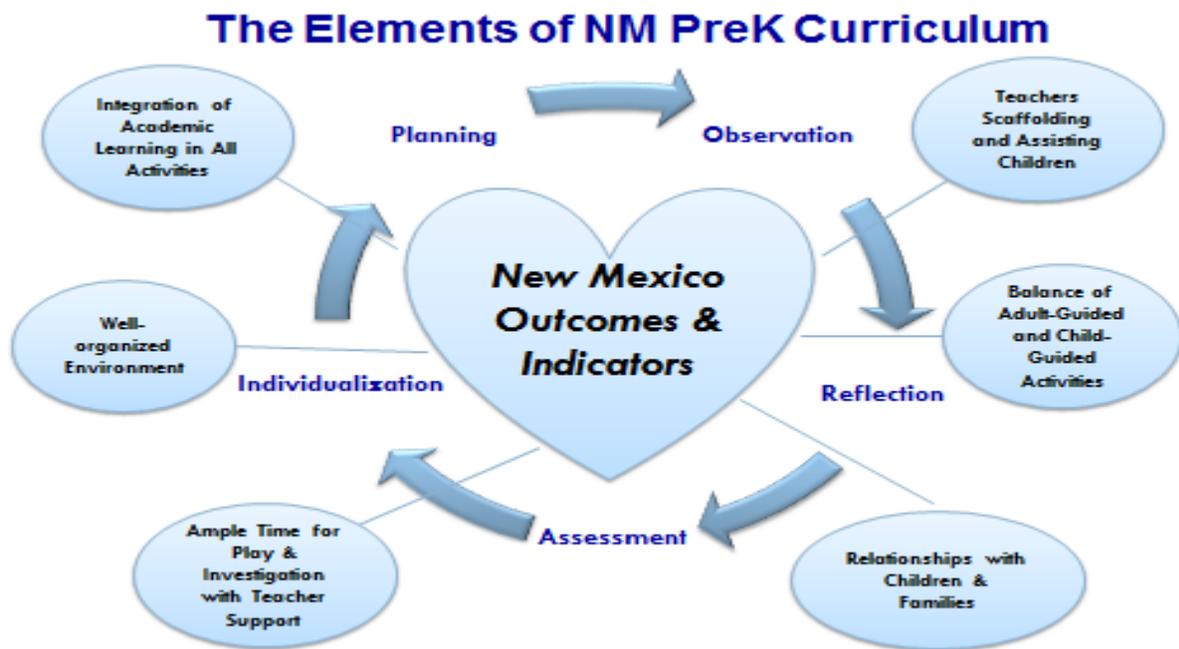
Teachers and children engage in the learning process together. Teachers work closely with children as they explore and discover concepts through high quality play experiences, interesting and engaging large and small group times and in daily routines. Teachers provide assistance or "scaffolding" to help children stretch to perform at a higher level than what each can do independently.

PreK Curriculum in New Mexico

New Mexico PreK curriculum is based on a developmental- interactionist approach where the adult and child engage in the learning process together. The teacher and educational assistant are critically important in the delivery of curricular goals, working closely with children as they explore and discover concepts, building understanding of the world around them.

"Developmental interaction can be contrasted with behavioral approaches to classroom instruction...the developing child and the adult are viewed as actively constructing meaning..." (Nager and Shapiro 2000, page 26) The child is not just passively receiving new information. Instead, learning is seen as occurring in a social environment with adults providing assistance or "scaffolding" to help children stretch to perform at a higher level than what each can do independently (Vygotsky 1978).

Below is a graphic conceptualization of the NM PreK Curriculum. The discussion to follow will highlight the primary elements: 1) the curricular goals as defined as outcomes and indicators, 2) the instructional cycle, and 3) the primary elements.



The Curriculum Goals. At the heart of curriculum are the New Mexico PreK Outcomes and Indicators which are incorporated into the New Mexico Early Learning Guidelines to show a continuum of development from birth through the kindergarten year. They are the goals about which all elements of curriculum revolve. They provide the foundation for learning and give reasonable expectations supported by research in child development. They are integrated into every aspect of the preschool day. They inform teachers as they plan, as they implement activities, as they guide children through play experiences and as they engage with children in daily routines. Because of this goal-oriented approach to curriculum, assessment is woven into every aspect of the preschool day. Teachers are continually observing their children in a variety of experiences, documenting those observations and collecting data to support conclusions about how each child is progressing.

The Instructional Cycle. New Mexico PreK curriculum focuses on the integration of the following teacher actions which take place in an on-going, cyclical process (represented by the arrows):

- **Planning** instructional experiences that are age-appropriate, culturally-situated, and based on the knowledge of the children and community.
- **Observation** of children in action and documentation of what they say and/or do.
- **Reflection** on observations and documentation. The teacher wonders “what does this mean for this child?” “What does this mean for my teaching?”
- **Assessment** that links observation, documentation of learning and next curricular steps.
- **Individualization** of curriculum to meet the needs of each and every child.
- **Planning** instructional experiences....

The Elements. There are six elements of curriculum that take place in the context of a rich play-based, intentional environment.

1) Integration of Learning in All Activities. Learning is planned for all activities and experiences in and out of the classroom. Even meals, transition times and outdoor explorations are opportunities for teachers to integrate the Outcomes and Indicators. Children demonstrate their skills and capabilities in all that they do – not just in specified assessment tasks or content-related activities. They use language as they play with friends outdoors, converse at snack time and transition from activity to activity. They problem solve, focus attention and apply their skills as they build with blocks, put together puzzles, look at familiar books and role play in dramatic play scenarios. They count and use quantity as they set the snack table, take attendance or determine how many children are in line to wash their hands. They recognize alphabet letters as they see their names in print on helper charts and name cards and often attempt to write letters as they participate in meaningful play such as going grocery shopping or writing notes to each other.

2) Well-Organized Environment. Teachers plan for activities and experiences that will encourage children to use their skills and capabilities as well as challenge them to learn new concepts and try something that is just beyond their present level. Planning such a range of experiences for children requires teachers to be thoughtful and intentional in setting up the environment so that the right materials and organized areas are available. In New Mexico PreK, recommendations for organizing the environment come from the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R). Areas of the classroom are organized so that specific activities can take place in each area. The specific activities include fine motor, art, music and movement, blocks, sand and water, dramatic play, and nature and science.

In addition, the New Mexico PreK Lesson Plan Format identifies the following classroom areas that teachers create and for which they plan and identify goals for children’s engagement on a weekly basis. These classroom areas are: blocks, art, math center, dramatic play, class library, science center, sensory table, manipulative area, and the writing center.

Teachers are invited to include one other learning area (such as music/movement or listening center) on the lesson plan format. They also have discretion in room organization, depending on the space, availability of furniture and materials, etc. Recommendations for room arrangement and provision of materials again are based on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R). PreK Consultants and others regularly review the classroom environment using the criteria of the ECERS-R and provide feedback to teachers so that the environment is providing high quality opportunities for the children.

3) Ample Time for Play and Investigation with Adult Support. Play continues to be an important aspect in the recommendations for best curricular approaches in preschool programs. Particularly for younger children, firsthand learning—through physical, mental, and social activity—is key. At every age from birth through age eight (and beyond), play can stimulate children’s engagement, motivation, and lasting learning (Bodrova & Leong 2003). Learning is facilitated when children can “choose from a variety of activities, decide what type

of products they want to create, and engage in important conversations with friends” (Espinosa 2002, 5).

Therefore, the daily schedule of a PreK classroom includes ample time for children to engage in play and investigation with adult support. Because of the careful planning of the environment, learning areas and activities, the play times (both indoors and out) have purpose. They are tied to identified goals taken directly from the PreK Outcomes and Indicators and based on observations. Teachers interact with children, provide support, ask questions, and offer challenges. Throughout these interactions, teachers observe children closely to determine each child’s capabilities. In this way, teachers are ensuring that children’s play experiences are at high levels with benefits to the children. In high level play, children are learning new skills and concepts and applying and adapting ones that are already established. The play and investigation times are when children become deeply engaged, work alone or together, and interact with adults who provide new vocabulary, help them determine problem-solving strategies and provoke their thinking.

4) **Balance of Adult-Guided and Child-Guided Activities.** As teachers facilitate play experiences, they may be following the child’s lead in the activity. The child directs his or her actions and the teacher helps in whatever ways are beneficial. Teachers also plan and lead activities and experiences for the children. The balance between child-direction and teacher-direction is important. And for young children, this balance may lean more heavily toward child-direction than for older children. Early childhood educators continually decide in what instances they will follow the child’s lead and in which moments to be in a more directive role themselves.

Developmentally appropriate teaching practices provide an optimal balance of adult-guided and child-guided experiences. “*Adult-guided* experience proceeds primarily along the lines of the teacher’s goals, but is also shaped by the children’s active engagement; *child-guided* experience proceeds primarily along the lines of children’s interests and actions, with strategic teacher support” (NAEYC Position Statement 2009, page 17).

5) **Relationships with Children and Families.** When they begin their PreK experience, many children may be leaving their home environment for the first time. Relationships with caring adults at the PreK program will make this transition go more smoothly for children and enhance their overall experience. “From birth, a child’s relationships and interactions with adults are critical determinants of development and learning” (NAEYC Position Statement 2009, page 17). And, establishing relationships with each child’s family strengthens the relationship between teachers and child. All adults in the child’s life are working together in partnership to assure the child’s optimum growth and development.

Children bring family and community ways of being to their early childhood settings. When building on these experiences, professionals support children and families to feel confident and included. According to the 2009 NAEYC Position Statement, “teachers establish positive, personal relationships with each child and with each child’s family to better understand that child’s individual needs, interests, and abilities and that family’s goals, values, expectations,

and childrearing practices...Teachers talk with each child and family (with a community translator, if necessary, for mutual understanding) and use what they learn to adapt their actions and planning” (p. 17-18). The richness and diversity of heritage, culture and home language for New Mexico’s PreK families is welcomed and honored in all aspects of the PreK program. Teachers regularly invite families to participate and share in a variety of ways to enrich the children’s PreK experience. And, attention is given to support each child’s home language development as well as his or her acquisition of English.

The Connection between Curriculum and Assessment

The commitment to authentic, observational assessment in New Mexico PreK is well-grounded in research and theory. Using a criterion-based approach, PreK teachers watch and listen as children participate in activities and experiences throughout the PreK day. They document observations for the purpose of reflection and planning as well as to assess each child’s capabilities and progress. They collect portfolio documentation on key Essential Indicators to capture tangible evidence of children’s progress and growth to share with families and to help with curricular planning. The New Mexico PreK Observational Assessment Tools are based on recommendations for best practices.

To best assess young children’s strengths, progress, and needs, use assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children’s daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of families, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes. The purposes of doing assessment are: (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions. (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2003, pages 1-2)

In New Mexico PreK curriculum, assessment does not stand apart. Teachers include Indicators in all aspects of the PreK day, identifying the ways they will incorporate them into play experiences, daily routines and large and small group activities. Teacher observation related to the PreK Outcomes and Indicators and the documentation of children’s performance related to the Indicators are on-going. Teacher reflection about these observations informs the teaching process and assists teachers in determining the most effective curricular strategies.

Academics, Play and Teacher Intentionality

Where do academics fit into NM PreK curriculum? How are content areas such as language arts, mathematics, science and social studies addressed? How are children prepared to succeed in kindergarten and the elementary grades? And what is the role of teachers in bringing about student success in the PreK year? These important questions must be addressed in this brief as well.

Learning is at the core of NM PreK curriculum. The content comes from the expectations identified in the New Mexico PreK Outcomes and Indicators. Well-grounded in research and

child development and reviewed by stakeholders throughout the State of New Mexico, these Outcomes encompass the following seven domains: 1) Physical Development, Health and Well-Being, 2) Literacy, 3) Numeracy, 4) Aesthetic/Creativity, 5) Scientific Conceptual Understanding, 6) Self, Family and Community and, 7) Approaches to Learning

The seven domains include traditional academic content areas (Literacy = Language Arts; Numeracy = Mathematics; Scientific Conceptual Understanding = Science; Self, Family and Community = Social Studies) and readiness skills such as working cooperatively with others, taking personal responsibility for belongings and focusing on a task for extended periods of time. Taken together, the content areas and the readiness skill development will prepare the preschool children to enter kindergarten ready to continue learning and developing.

PreK teachers are responsible to incorporate the Outcomes and Indicators in the seven domains into all activities and experiences planned for the children. They write specific indicators as goals for play areas, for meals and transition times, for outdoor explorations, for small group and individual reading times and for large and small group activities. They choose materials and teaching strategies that will support these goals. They do not limit addressing academics to only teacher-directed activities. Instead they imbed academic goals in purposeful play experiences as well as in daily routines.

The PreK curriculum emphasizes the many benefits of high quality play for young children as stated in the Key Messages of the Developmentally Appropriate Practices Position Statement (NAEYC 2009):

- Rather than diminishing children’s learning by reducing the time devoted to academic activities, play promotes key abilities that enable children to learn successfully. In high-level dramatic play, for example, the collaborative planning of roles and scenarios and the impulse control required to stay within the play’s constraints develop children’s self-regulation, symbolic thinking, memory, and language—capacities critical to later learning, social competence, and school success.
- Because of how they spend their time outside of school, many young children now lack the ability to play at the high level of complexity and engagement that affords so many cognitive, social, and emotional benefits. As a result, it is vital for early childhood settings to provide opportunities for sustained high-level play and for teachers to actively support children’s progress toward such play (p.3).

Through play experiences as well as teacher-directed small and large group activities, teachers plan such that academic skills and concepts related to literacy, numeracy, science and social studies are included. They address academics in age-appropriate and meaningful ways rather than attempting to adapt approaches that work with children in the elementary grades. In a joint position statement (1998), NAEYC and the International Reading Association offer the following recommendations for addressing literacy in preschool classrooms:

Thus the picture that emerges from research in these first years of children’s reading and writing is one that emphasizes wide exposure to print and to developing concepts about it and its forms and functions. Classrooms filled with print, language and literacy play, storybook reading, and writing allow children to experience the joy and power associated with reading and writing while mastering basic concepts about print that research has shown are strong predictors of achievement(p.5).

Math and science are also included in PreK curriculum in accordance with recommended preschool practices. Brenneman, Stevenson-Boyd and Frede (2009, 1) state, “mathematics and science should be treated as essential components of a comprehensive, high-quality preschool program, not as extras”. The following components of early childhood math education are identified by Ginsburg, Lee and Boyd (2008, 6-8) and are found in NM’s PreK Curriculum.

1. **Environment** - The preschool classroom...should contain a rich variety of objects and materials—such as blocks, dress up area and puzzles—that can set the stage for mathematics [or literacy, science and social studies] learning.
2. **Play** We know that children do indeed learn a good deal of everyday mathematics [literacy, science and social studies] on their own (Seo & Ginsburg, 2004). Play provides valuable opportunities to explore and to undertake activities than can be surprisingly sophisticated from a mathematical point of view [but] play is not enough.
3. **Teachable Moment**-The teachable moment involves the teacher’s careful observation of children’s play and other activities in order to identify the spontaneously emerging situation that can be exploited to promote learning.
4. **Projects** - These are extensive teacher initiated and guided explorations of complex topics related to the everyday world.
5. **Intentional Teaching**- Deliberate instruction or teaching is a key part of Early Childhood Mathematics Education as well as that for literacy, science and social studies. Teachers and other key professionals should actively introduce concepts, methods, and language through a range of appropriate experiences and teaching strategies.

The intentionality of teachers is a key message in the third edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Such intentionality is not limited to direct instruction. Intentionality can incorporate many teaching strategies.

Teachers possess an extensive repertoire of skills and strategies they are able to draw on, and they know how and when to choose among them, to effectively promote each child’s learning and development at that moment. Those skills include the ability to adapt curriculum, activities, and materials to ensure full participation of *all* children. Those strategies include, but are not limited to, acknowledging, encouraging, giving

specific feedback, modeling, and demonstrating, adding challenge, giving cues or other assistance, providing information, and giving directions. (NAEYC Position Statement page 18)

To effectively implement NM PreK curriculum, teachers not only plan to use specific strategies and write them on the PreK Lesson Plan Format, but they also continually adapt and decide on strategies as they interact with children. They address academic content in ways that fit the moment and appear to be most beneficial to the children. Then, they observe the impact of their planned strategy and change their approach if necessary. Teacher intentionality is central to the observation, documentation and planning process for PreK curriculum as well as the integration of academic goals and outcomes.

Conclusion

New Mexico PreK curriculum and assessment practices are based on a strong foundation of research in child development and recommendations for best early educational practices. Curriculum and assessment are interwoven in an on-going process that requires teachers to be thoughtful, know their children and families well, and understand the best ways to facilitate young children's learning experiences. The goal of New Mexico PreK curriculum is to provide the highest quality preschool experiences for the children of New Mexico.

References and Resources

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