

# Curricular Decision-Making for the Education of Young Gifted Children

Beverly N. Parke  
Wayne State University

Phyllis S. Ness  
Gateway School

## Abstract

Four basic tenets must be kept in mind regarding curricular decisions for young gifted children. These tenets govern the direction that curriculum for them may take and the manner in which educators interact with these children. First, young gifted children have special learning needs. They differ in that they have the capability to learn at greater depth and more quickly, and they have interests which may predate those of their peers. Second, curriculum should be drawn from their special interests and needs. Next, the work of childhood is play; therefore, the curriculum of young gifted children must emphasize exploration and play. Finally, young gifted children should be engaged in the curricular decision making process. This article elaborates these four principles in curricular decision making for young gifted children.

Educators and parents of young gifted children (ages 3-6) face an interesting dilemma when planning activities and experiences for these children. On the one hand, these children are seemingly ready to engage in activities which are usually reserved for older children. On the other hand, these children appear to have many of the physical, emotional, and social limitations of their chronological peers. What do you do? Do you have the children reading books, filling out workbook pages, and doing math problems? Or, do you spread out the building blocks on the carpet and let the children build?

This type of decision can be made by determining what educational opportunities are in the best interest of any particular child at a given time. These decisions can be facilitated by remembering four basic tenets:

1. Young gifted children have special learning needs. They learn more quickly, in greater depth, and have interests which may differ from other children of the same age.
2. Curriculum for these children should be drawn from their interests and educational needs.
3. The work of childhood is play. Therefore, the curriculum of young gifted children must emphasize exploration, manipulation, and play.
4. Young gifted children should be engaged in the curricular decision-making process, so that they learn how to take responsibility for their own learning.

These principles form the basis of the decision-making process relative to curriculum for these children and are con-

sistent with the guidelines for appropriate practice under consideration by National Association for the Education of Young Children (1985). They also reflect a philosophy grounded in respect for children as individuals and as people capable of reasonable decisions when they are given the necessary guidance and experience to become independent learners.

Designing curriculum on these bases should have a number of outcomes which will enhance the children's learning. Their menu of activities will be balanced through the types of experiences generated. It is most likely that the children will be involved in reading books AND in building castles from blocks. The cognitive, physical, emotional, and social needs of the children will be addressed since their unique needs will indicate the nature of their activities. Experience will be gained in decision making, problem solving, and basic learning strategies as the children enter into the process of determining the types of activities in which they will be engaged and making choices between alternative possibilities. In addition, they will be gaining the skills which they are capable of attaining based on their own readiness and interests.

## Special Learning Needs of Young Gifted Children

The more the abilities of young children are examined by research, the more evident their capabilities become. Young children are actively engaged in learning from the time they are conceived. They enter the world with knowledge and experiences from which they have learned. All children do not, however, learn in the same manner. Nor do they desire to learn the same things at the same time.

Gifted children tend to have learning characteristics which differ from their age peers and lead to the necessity of curricular differentiation. Among the most frequently mentioned differences are the rate and depth at which these children learn and the types of interests that they have. It has been estimated that as many as 50% of gifted children read prior to entering school (Witty, 1971), and over 80% of high scoring talent search students in the midwest do (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). Advanced vocabularies are a typical characteristic of these youngsters. Not only do they know how to pronounce sophisticated words, but they also use them properly in context (Ehrlich, 1978). Parents and teachers of young gifted children also find that these students are characterized by an "urgency to mean" (Halliday, 1975). They are constantly struggling to determine how things function, where things come from, and how their universe works. This insatiable curiosity is typical of young gifted children. Their ques-

tions come in rapid succession, and their need to know seems unending. It is most likely that this need is bound only by the patience of the person to whom the questions are being directed!

Heightened sensitivity to physical and emotional factors also seems to typify young gifted children (Roedell, Jackson & Robinson, 1980). They are very aware of the people and circumstances that surround them. This awareness often becomes apparent in conjunction with their ability to make associations and understand concepts which would appear to be too abstract for their abilities. For example, it would not be surprising to find that the young gifted child in a preschool would not only be the one to discover the death of the pet guinea pig, but also to take the passing the hardest. The gifted are also aware of other children's emotions to a far greater extent than most children and may offer to be the friend of a child who is alone because the gifted child would not want the lonely child to feel uncared for.

Incredible memory is another common learning characteristic among young gifted children. They seem to absorb knowledge endlessly. Only sleep closes the storage banks for the day. This ability to remember is enhanced by their prolonged attention span. Young gifted children are able to concentrate for comparatively long periods of time when they are involved in a task that interests them. Whereas we might expect a preschooler to spend ten minutes at the easel painting a tree, a gifted child may be engaged in a painting for thirty minutes—planning and executing an intricate landscape.

These are among the many characteristics of young gifted children that necessitate the building of a unique curriculum. Pace, depth, and interests vary from what we expect from typical young children. Therefore, educators must develop curriculum which will respond to these factors.

### Curriculum Should Be Drawn from Children's Interests and Needs

It is no longer unusual to pick up the paper, a magazine, or flier and see advertisements and articles claiming that fifteen month old children can learn to read and that two year olds can learn to compute. Parents and educators who become involved in these programs are told that their children will have a "headstart" on other children and an advantage all their lives. Young gifted children naturally learn such skills at an earlier age, and these programs are frightening to educators who are concerned that young children who are "hurried" (Elkind, 1981) may become adolescents with learning and emotional adjustment problems.

Educators of preschool gifted children are also frustrated by parental expectations of their offspring. Parents often confuse "schooling" with "learning" and expect their children to be engaged in "school activities" such as workbooks, dittoes, and reading groups. They complain that when they spend up to \$4,000 a year for their four year old to go to school, they do not expect to see the child crawling around on the

floor after a truck, playing "dress-up," or singing "The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round."

Teachers and parents alike are being bombarded with information on what constitutes appropriate learning opportunities for their children. Parents of young gifted children seem to pay closer attention to these matters, as they often feel a heightened sense of responsibility for educational experiences that their children may have. Both parents and educators need to remember that the needs of the child form the basis of appropriate early learning experiences; thus environments that are stimulating to all the senses, that allow children individual freedom of expression and manipulation provide an important early context.

The primary source from which educators and parents can gather information for making decisions regarding curriculum is the children themselves. It has long been known that each of us has "critical periods" (Vygotsky, in Clark, 1983) at which times learning is most likely to occur. These vary from person to person. However, close observation and interaction with a child can help us to make sound judgments as to whether such a time is at hand. By becoming aware of the normal developmental patterns of children, closely observing the development of the children involved in an educational setting, and talking to the children about their interests, likes, and dislikes, educators can begin to construct curricular packages that will respond to students' current developmental levels and interest.

Much of curricular decision-making and planning comes down to a question of balance. The curriculum must be balanced to respond to the unique learning needs of the gifted and their unusual make-up. This is done by creating an integrated curriculum containing opportunity and expectation for creative expression; a variety of methods for expression; opportunity to interact with adults, children, and many types of materials; an array of options from which activities can be selected; and an emphasis on language development.

An integrated curriculum is one in which the concepts and objectives of a unit of study are interspersed throughout the activities of the school day. For example, an integrated curricular structure in which dinosaurs are being studied might have the reading corner filled with books on prehistoric life, miniature plastic dinosaurs roaming in the sand table, the dress-up corner set up with a cave, dinosaur bones on the math table to count and sort, a skeleton of the beast on the science table along with ferns, plants, and a working model of a volcano, and dinosaur eggs for snack. The study of dinosaurs is infused throughout the day, and the children are asked to interact with the concepts from many points of view and through many skill areas.

Students engage in interactive activities with others as well as the environment and materials presented in the integrated curriculum. During reading time, gifted children may have the opportunity to read a story to the other children in the class, or to tell or dramatize a story of their own making. By allowing a variety of methods to enable expression, the

teacher will ease the anxiety that young gifted children feel when their cognitive abilities surpass their ability to speak, write, or demonstrate.

The interaction among adults and children in the classroom and the materials available is critical to the integrated curriculum. As gifted children relate to one another and the adults present, they learn social skills as well as language. Interacting with the available materials allows them to explore media and to investigate new combinations, standard uses, and how different combinations of materials can relate to one another.

The issue of balancing the curriculum is constant. Teachers balance activities which they select with those students select. Structured time is balanced with time for free play. More traditionally "academic" activities are balanced with play and open exploration. The children's time is balanced between interacting with adults, other children, and time alone. Time spent on learning new skills is balanced with time refining those already attained. Students are given the freedom to find a balance between the children that they are and the abilities that they display.

### **Curriculum Must Emphasize Play, Exploration, and Manipulation**

Play is the work of childhood. When children engage in play they are exploring the world and determining the effects of acting upon the environment which they have created. It is a process through which children gain a good deal of information about other people, societal structures, language, and the power of creative thought. The standard question, "Is all you do play, don't you teach these children something?", is ridiculous. Riley (1974) states, "Much of the knowledge children absorb is best acquired by exploration in the real world where they may freely, actively, construct their vision of reality, rather than be passively instructed about it" (p. 139).

Dramatic play, or sociodramatic play (Smilansky, 1968), as it is also called, is often found in the activities of young children. In dramatic play, children take on a role in which they imitate real life by using their imaginations. The skills that children acquire during this activity are many of the same skills that are needed for success in school: problem solving; creativity; dealing with abstractions; acquiring new knowledge; and the social skills of interacting, sharing, tolerance, consideration, and self-control.

Young gifted children will often show their capabilities through play. Intricate block structures indicate the children's abilities to elaborate. Dramatic play demonstrates their sophisticated use of language. Employing new combinations of materials and ideas shows the ability to be imaginative and inventive. Observing play can give educators information on the students' abilities.

Play must be an integral part of the curricular planning for young gifted children. It gives them an outlet of expression

and a vehicle for learning. In the curriculum, then, play should not be seen as an extra, but, rather, a time that is as carefully planned as whole group activities. Teachers should select the materials that are to be available during play and present new combinations of materials for the children to explore. The cognitive, social, and physical skills of the children are developed as they work at the business of play.

### **Engage Children in the Curricular Decision Making Process**

One of the primary goals of the educational process is to teach students to be lifelong learners. They cannot accomplish that goal if they are not given a chance to take responsibility for their learning and become part of the process of curricular decision making. This is also true in the case of young gifted children. They are capable of making decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to learn.

The expected outcomes are beyond acquiring the skills of a lifelong learner, however. Anker, Foster, McLane, Sobell, and Weissbourd (1974) state, "Children who are permitted to engage in activities of their own choice gain a sense of autonomy and effectiveness; become motivated to mastery; and develop such attributes as self-direction trust in themselves, self assurance, and a feeling of self worth" (p. 146).

Teachers typically provide a choice of approximately three activities from which children may choose. For example, at the math table, the students may have the choice among counting dinosaur bones, categorizing the bones, or recreating the size of a dinosaur by extending adding machine tape to equal the appropriate measurement of various types of dinosaurs. The teacher organizes the activities, all of which are appropriate for the students, and the students determine which they will complete based on their own interests and needs.

It is usually the case that when children are asked to choose a number of options, they will select the options which are most developmentally correct for them. Children are motivated to learn, and it is through learning and creativity that they grow and survive in the world.

### **Conclusion**

The early experiences of young gifted children have great impact on their learning later in life. It is essential that people who help such children make educational choices do so from an informed position. They must be aware of the interests and needs of the individual children and do their best to provide curriculum which will enhance their cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. Using an integrated curriculum is one method for accomplishing that goal. Actively engaging children in this type of learning experience is a step toward ensuring that these children will emerge as successful lifelong learners.

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