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Preschool Social Emotional Learning and Curriculum Design: The  
Changing System

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### **Abstract**

As early as the seventeenth century, theorists began to recognize early childhood as a distinct time of life. Prodigious research from the past forty years describes the positive educational outcomes for students attending quality early childhood programs. This literature review will examine the history of early childhood education and important themes that have emerged over time. The theme of social emotional learning will be a focus as one of the key outcomes of early learning programs and a determinant of later school success. In addition, the effects of poverty on the developing child, along with ways to mitigate these effects will be explored. Lastly, the literature will scrutinize best practices when designing early childhood curriculum based on state standards.

### Preschool Social Emotional Learning and Curriculum Design: The Changing System

The prevalence of early childhood education programs in the United States has increased significantly since the 1960's. During this time, early childhood education and education as a whole have changed significantly. According to Green, Malsch, Kothari, Busse and Brennan (2012), as many as seventy-five percent of children are enrolled in an early childhood education or care program in the United States. From early infant schools to current educational practices, the history of early education and care provides the educator with an insightful overview of how the field has evolved. Historical data demonstrates how the value early childhood education has shifted over time.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of young children with challenging behaviors in early childhood programs. It is estimated that the percentage of students currently enrolled in early childhood programs with significant behavioral challenges may be as high as twelve, fifteen or twenty percent (Green, Malsch, Kothari, Busse, & Brennan, 2012, Graves & Howes, 2011). Without additional training or support, teachers are often unsure how to help these children be successful in the early childhood classroom. Preschool expulsion rates continue to increase, particularly for children of color (Graves & Howes, 2011). Klein reports, in the 2013-2014 school year alone, 6,700 children were suspended from public preschool programs in the United States (p. 1). In light of this data, it could be conjectured that social emotional learning is an important aspect of preschool education. Developing the ability to self-regulate is necessary to be successful in later grades.

Logue (2007) shared that while high-quality preschool is a benefit to young children, low-quality preschool is a detriment. Traditionally, children living in poverty have less access to quality schools, including early childhood education. Seminal research describes the effects of poverty on the developing child. These effects include toxic stress, which can permanently change the developing brain. Poverty creates material hardships that increase parental stress (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007). When parents are stressed, anxiety can filter

throughout the family system. The issues correlated with poverty can have negative impacts on student learning. Educators must find ways to mitigate the effects of poverty, thus allowing the developing child to achieve educational and development outcomes.

Currently, in the field of early childhood education, there is a push to design educational practices around state early learning standards. The most current early learning standards in Iowa were presented in 2012. Early learning standards have not been without concerns. Young children develop on a continuum that needs to be allowed for, and therefore is not standardized (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004, p. 389). Concerns about what content these standards would take has also been a concern for early educators who understand children learn through movement and play (Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley & Neil, 2008). By reviewing literature based on standards-based curriculum, the author seeks to identify best practice in curriculum design based on current research.

Early childhood is a period of rapid growth and development both physically and cognitively. The greatest brain growth occurs within the first three years of life. From infancy, children acquire new skills at a rapid rate that will slow as they age. By the time children are five year old, they must have the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed when faced with rigorous kindergarten Common Core standards. Cascio and Schamzenback (2013), when reviewing former President Obama's, Preschool for All initiative, point to the body of research that illustrates the importance of preschool education, particularly for children from low-income homes. As far back as the Perry Preschool Program in the 1960's, educators have been demonstrating the long-term educational outcomes for students who attended a quality preschool program. Educators working with young children must provide learning environments and activities that support this development. Leaders in the field of early childhood education must advocate for children and the policies necessary to support the growth and development of all children, regardless of race, gender or area of the world. This literature review hopes to provide concrete information regarding ways educators can meet this objective.

Finally, the goal of the early childhood educator is curriculum development and program improvement. After thorough literature review, the results thereof will be communicated with stakeholders in the field of early childhood education. A plan will be devised to create superlative curriculum that will lead to greater educational outcomes for all students. This curriculum will embody information gleaned from reviewing current literature as well as best practices in the field of early childhood education. Additionally, the curriculum will be reviewed by early childhood professionals before being implemented in the early childhood program.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Historical Context**

In the early nineteenth century, early childhood education in the United States was modeled after European infant schools. According to Cahan (1989), infant schools developed in Europe in response to a high mortality rate among the infants of factory workers. These schools were considered successful interventions in Europe. In the United States, infant schools were seen as a means to provide religious education and to fight the effects of poverty, which was seen as a spiritual, not moral, issue (Cahan, 1989). In the 1961, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), surveyed sixty-five countries to determine what was being done to educate young children, what programs were successful, the costs for countries of administering quality programs, the state of teachers for these programs and the spectrum of current research (Kamerman, 2006). These findings identified both areas of strength and weakness. UNESCO also established the importance of this period of development, and the desire of all countries to discover ways to best support development.

A well-known preschool experiment took place in the 1960's in Michigan, the Perry Preschool program. Described by Cascio and Schanenbach (2013) the Perry Preschool program specifically targeted African American students living in areas of significant economic disparity. Children attended half-day preschool sessions and home visits were required once per week. Families were provided with stimulating toys to encourage learning at home.

Documentation was collected for the next forty years. Using IQ scores, researchers demonstrated increased IQ's for Perry Preschool attendees. However, there were no significant IQ differences in children by age ten. Long term, the Perry Preschool attendees did better in high school, were less likely to require special education and had fewer absences (Cascio & Schanenbach, 2013). As one of the earliest preschool studies, the Perry Preschool program demonstrated that preschool can lead to more significant educational outcomes for students. The Perry Preschool program also highlighted how quality preschool and parent training can improve educational outcomes for children living in poverty.

Partly due to the success of the Perry Preschool program, Head Start was developed in the 1960's in the United States. Originally, Head Start was also a means to lower welfare payments by providing low cost childcare options for families in poverty (Cahan, 1989,). Head Start allowed low-income families the ability to work by providing affordable childcare. Cross (2008) noted that as Head Start developed, the focus changed to helping children living in poverty better prepare for elementary education. For the first time in the history of the United States, a formal program attempted to increase skills and knowledge for children living in poverty. Concerns about student performance in high poverty areas were finally being addressed and at the preschool level.

After No Child Left Behind was proposed in 2001, many states have created universal voluntary preschool opportunities. State to state, there are differences in what types of preschool experiences are available. In Iowa, for example, four-year-old children are allotted ten free hours of preschool per week. Programs can also apply for state money that help support wrap around programs. Wrap around programs help preschools extend the school day to provide care for children with working parents. According to the Iowa Department of Education (2017) website, "The purpose of Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old Children is to provide an opportunity for all young children in the State of Iowa to enter school ready to learn by expanding voluntary access to quality preschool curricula for all

four-year-old children” (p. 1). Iowa also offers Shared Visions, a program specifically to support preschool education for children living in poverty.

## **Themes**

### **Poverty**

Extensive literature is devoted to poverty and how it influences the education of young children. From the development of Head Start to the current day, combating the effects of poverty remains a difficult task for schools, including early childhood programs. Federal programs created throughout modern history demonstrate degrees of success in helping children in poverty succeed in school. Head Start began as a way to help families in poverty join the workforce by providing low-cost childcare, but evolved into an educational boost to narrow the gap between children living in poverty and middle class peers. According to the Early Head Start website (2016), Early Head Start was established in 1994 to help children under the age of three years and pregnant women from low-income homes. Together, these programs target children during a critical stage of development. Head Start and Early Head Start also offer support and education for families regarding child development and learning. According to Barnett and Frede (2010) high quality preschool better prepares children living in poverty for the rigors of kindergarten as compared to peers who do not attend preschool. Barnett and Frede (2010) go on to point out long term benefits of attending high quality preschool, for example lower school dropout rates. Early education is an important piece of the puzzle in abating the effects of poverty.

Quality preschool has been proven to provide support for children living in poverty, helping to close the gap between these children and children living in middle class homes. As reported by Cascio and Schanzenback (2013), quality preschool is critical for children in poverty, and worth the investment. However, positive correlations are only seen when children attend high quality preschool programs. Poor quality early education is not linked to student achievement. Unfortunately, children in areas with the highest poverty often have limited

access to early education, and little choice as far as quality. However, Barnett and Frede (2010) argue that targeting lower-income students has not proven to be an effective practice (p. 27). The researchers instead suggest quality preschool be a part of the free and appropriate public education system, and treated as a critical year of learning worthy of funding and training. Gullo (2013) goes so far as to suggest data-driven decisions about how and where resources are appropriated (p. 415). By identifying schools with the poorest populations, funding sources could target these schools by providing excellent resources. In this way, all learners within a system of education would be given the same opportunities. This emphasis on children's earliest school years could lead to better educational outcomes overall for all students.

Poverty influences family systems; the effects are not isolated. Adults and children can experience high levels of stress. Three important parental outcomes of the stress of poverty identified by Gershoff, Aber, Raver and Lennon (2007) are "parental stress, parent investment of money or time in children, and aspects of parent behavior such as harsh discipline or warmth" (p. 70). These parental outcomes influence the way parents and children interact. Negative interactions between adult and child can interfere with a child's basic need for safety and security. According to Smith, Stagnitti, Lewis and Pepin (2015), parents living in multi-generational poverty found parenting to be difficult, but did not seek help or support (p. 878). Parents who feel they have no support, and are experience high levels of stress may not be able to provide young children with the kind of care and support that leads to feelings of safety and wellbeing. The lack of these basic needs can lead to long term social emotional issues. Gershoff, Aber, Raver and Lennon (2007) assert that children with stressed parents are more likely to experience negative social issues and have emotional and behavioral issues. When children bring these issues to school, they can be labeled and misunderstood by educators not aware of the issues surrounding poverty. Without appropriate instruction and intervention, students could struggle with prosocial behaviors that lead to school success.

While the issues are complicated, poverty can also lead to language and communication gaps. People living in generational poverty tend to use less sophisticated language than those in the middle class. Children may not learn the formal register needed to negotiate at school with adults and peers. This can lead to behavioral issues, real or perceived, that interfere with learning. Parents may have different beliefs about speaking to infants and toddlers, leading to children who have been exposed to less language overall. Abraham, Crais and Vernon-Feagans (2013) found a correlation between language used by mothers with their six-month-old children during read alouds and language outcomes for the same children at fifteen months. The findings suggest that language intervention should begin as early as possible for young children. Research also highlights the importance of parental language usage with infants and toddlers. It is vital that educators working with children understand issues related to language and generational poverty. As explained by Ruby Payne (2003), educators should be aware of hidden rules of poverty, but educate children about the hidden rules of middle class, including differences in language. Early educators can advocate for early intervention and focus on teaching young children language needed to negotiate and collaborate with adults and peers.

Overall, children in poverty enter school at a disadvantage compared to their middle class peers. Early childhood educators must consider areas of need and interpose in ways that lead to better outcomes for young children. Parental education and support appear to be key. According to Trawick-Smith (2014), high quality early childhood programs that include family involvement have been proven to have positive effects for children at-risk and living in poverty. Any curriculum or program wishing to level the educational playing field for all children must also provide resources for families. Poverty should not be the reason children are not able to achieve rigorous educational standards. Excellent early childhood programs will meet the needs of all students.

### **Early Intervention and Inclusion**

Two important facets of early childhood education are early intervention and inclusion. While separate ideas, inclusion and early intervention are inextricably linked and highly interconnected. Early intervention is critical when working to close the gap between children with disabilities and same aged peers. Just as the research by Abraham, Crais and Vernon-Feagans (2013) highlighted the importance of early intervention for language, early intervention is highly correlated to overall developmental and academic gains. Most research regarding early childhood education points to inclusive practices when delivering any type of instruction. This includes specifically designed instruction targeting identified areas of need. Inclusive practices are also recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a leading organization in the field of early childhood education. Since the implementation of the Education for all Handicapped Children (PL 94-142), Least Restrictive Environment has been identified as the appropriate setting for instruction. However, the gap between theory and practice remains a concern for students with disabilities, as many programs still employ resource-based models or separate classrooms to educate these students. The importance of early intervention for all areas of delayed development is well documented in the literature. Ratcliff, et al (2017), pointed out the importance of educators and paraprofessionals modeling correct language for preschool children as this is a critical time for language development or delay. The authors emphasized the relevance of providing students with questions that required higher order thinking to stimulate the development of correct and complex language. Modeling of behaviors is an important aspect of inclusion. Without appropriate adult and peer models, it is difficult for children with developmental delays of all types to learn appropriate skills and behaviors.

Inclusive practice is not a recent concern in education. Federal law established procedural safeguards and defined Least Restrictive Environment in the original legislation regarding the education of individuals with special needs. In 1975, Public Law 94-184 stated, "removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occurs only when

the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (p. 9). This language clearly points to inclusion with non-disabled peers with the help of supplementary aids and services. However, perhaps due to ease of service provision, it is not uncommon for children to be taken from the general education environment and provided services either one-on-one or in a small group setting. This is particularly problematic for skills such as prosocial behaviors, which need to be practiced many times before becoming habit.

According to Soodak et al., (2002) barriers to inclusion include lack of professional development for teachers, teacher beliefs concerning inclusive practice and lack of training or support. Inclusive practices require a team effort, with all stakeholders having a part in creating a plan that works for the individual student. This could include additional technology or staff, resources that need to be acquired or consulting with an expert to solve a problem. Teacher buy-in is important, and without support will be hard to gain. When educators buy in to the idea of inclusion, collaboration will help achieve educational success for all students. Darrow (2009) offers simple solutions to barriers to inclusive practices including focusing on one student at a time rather than the entire student body of children in special education and discovering student strengths. Schools currently not using inclusive practices could begin one student at a time. In this way, each student’s needs can be addressed at a rate that will not be overwhelming for educators new to the idea of inclusion. Buy-in will be more likely as educators experience success.

Another barrier identified by Soodak, et al., (2002) was a lack of knowledge by administration and practitioners. Research regarding inclusive practice was not being sought or consumed. This leads to uninformed decision-making that is not in the best interest of the student. Inclusive practice needs to be a top-down commitment in order to help ensure successful implementation. This commitment is what leads to the kind of support needed for inclusive practices to succeed. When administrators understand and support inclusion, they are

better positioned to equip educators for successful inclusive practices. In 1985, Canada passed the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, mandating inclusive practices across the country in all areas, education included. According to Sokal and Katz (2015), school change has been slow, but across Canada, provinces have passed laws to achieve the goal of inclusion in schools. One of the most important indicators Sokal and Katz identified for successful change to inclusive practices was teacher education. When given appropriate knowledge and tools, educators are more willing to engage in inclusive education. Educators who feel capable of teaching all students can confidently engage in inclusive practices.

Odom and Wolery (2003) point out the importance of proximal development for the young child (p. 167). Learning and development are promoted when children are in environments with interesting, appropriate materials and attentive adults. Thoughtful interventions can be implemented within the general education setting. Thus, each child receives the instruction required embedded within the natural school day. Children with disabilities are surrounded by typically developing peers. These peers provide appropriate role models for all areas of learning and development. In fact, Odom and Wolery (2003) described play situations in which typically developing children reduced their language naturally to make cooperative play more accessible for students with disabilities (p. 168). Not only did this allow all children to engage in play, it led to language development for the students with disabilities. Interactions such as these are only possible in a unified setting. If services are delivered in a resource or special class model, children with disabilities do not have peers with appropriate play skills with which to interact. Jackson, Pretti-Frontczak, Harjusola-Webb, Grisham-Brown and Romani (2009) echo these ideas, calling inclusion “recommended practice” (p. 426). It is also recommended that programs begin with a strong curricular framework with which to build in supports and interventions. Strong, developmentally appropriate curriculum is a key element for all learners to meet rigorous educational outcomes.

Through research, Conyers, Reynolds and Ou (2003) demonstrated that early access had significant benefits for children in the Chicago school district. Children from low-income families who attended preschool were less likely to require special education services than their peers who did not attend preschool. Addressing this skill gap between same aged peers is important. While it is illegal for children to be identified for special education services due to environmental causes, it is still not uncommon in schools in low-income areas. If skills are slow to develop due to unidentified poor educational practices, students could be labeled as learning disabled. If schools are not using an inclusive model, students could spend time each day removed from the rich instruction in the general education environment to work on simplistic skills. Using the Preschool First Step to Success, Feil et al. (2016) demonstrated significant improvements in prosocial skills and accompanying ADHD symptoms in the preschoolers participating in the study. In both studies referenced, interventions were all implemented within the general education setting along with varying levels of parent education. Implementing intervention in the general education setting requires thoughtful planning, collaboration between practitioners and support. However, it is recommended practice for the early childhood setting.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

A growing body of research explores the connection between social emotional learning and future school success. The abilities to share, follow directions, take turns and generally self-regulate grow in importance as children leave early childhood, play-based classrooms for settings with more teacher-directed learning. Zinsser, Shewark, Denham and Curby (2014) assert that preschoolers who are able to self-regulate demonstrate greater school success throughout elementary school. As education moves towards evidence-based learning, the ability to self-regulate and work with others as a part of a team is of greater importance than ever before. These skills must be taught and practiced so students enter elementary school with the skills needed to succeed.

Social emotional learning in the early childhood classroom takes on several forms. Children interact with others and identify effective ways to ensure their needs are met. These efforts can be effective and immediate, and still not be prosocial. A growing body of research suggest social emotional learning must be intentionally taught and modeled by early educators. According to Denham, Bassett, Zinsser and Wyatt (2014), educators should assess students' social emotional skills and target specific instruction. The researchers suggest that in recent years greater numbers of young children spend greater amounts of time in institutional settings such as school and child care centers.

According to Graves and Howes (2011), there is a strong link between children exhibiting challenging behaviors in early childhood continuing to exhibit challenging behaviors in adolescence. The importance of learning appropriate social skills in preschool cannot be overemphasized. While the significance of literacy or STEM learning might be the latest educational focus, without prosocial skills a child will continue to struggle in the classroom. Early educators must deliberately teach necessary social skills and create opportunities for students to practice. Green, Malsch, Kothari, Bussi and Brennan (2012) reported that between four and twelve percent of students are diagnosed with serious behavior disorders. It behoves educators to have an established social emotional curriculum and to continue to educate themselves regarding challenging behaviors.

In the rural, low-income school district, some children display behaviors associated with toxic stress. These behaviors often look and behave like attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). However, they are instead a child's response to stress and anxiety. According to Fuchs, Klein, Otton and von Klitzing (2012), boys exhibit these externalized behaviors in greater numbers. This is particularly troubling considering that suspensions of children as young as three or four years of age are on the rise. According to Graves and Howes (2011) a study of preschool programs in Massachusetts revealed more than a third of teachers reported expelling a student for behaviors. This is a troubling trend, as these young children need support to learn

appropriate behaviors in a setting with their peers. It also brings up issues related to Free and Appropriate Public Education laws.

Expulsion is troubling for other reasons as well. As previously stated, boys are more likely to exhibit the negative behaviors that lead to expulsion. As reported by Graves and Howes (2011) among those expelled from preschool, black children are twice as likely to be expelled. Graves and Howes go on to state that black males are far more likely to be in special education than whites or Latinos. As classrooms across the United States become more diverse, it is important that educators examine their own biases. Being aware of bias is the first step in addressing the problem of race and expulsion. It is also important for educators to ensure all ethnicities are represented in all aspects of the classroom including works of literature, pictures and toys such as dolls and figurines. With deliberate consideration, educators can create classrooms where diversity is celebrated.

The increase in children with serious behaviors in early childhood settings presents challenges for educators. According to Hemmeter, Santos and Ostrosky (2008), preservice teachers should receive not just course work in working with young children with challenging behaviors, but supervised practice as well. Changes in pedagogy may be necessary for some educators so that behaviors can be seen as challenges needing solutions rather than punishment and expulsion. A basic understanding of mental health and early childhood is also important. Researchers Green, Malsch, Kothari, Busse and Brennan (2012) describe the early childhood mental health consultation approach as an effective way to address children's mental health and behavioral issues within the school setting. Increasing knowledge base. As well as support, for educators leads to positive educational outcomes for children.

A review of the literature regarding social emotional learning reveals of the importance of this area of development. Curriculum should address prosocial behaviors that will enable children to be successful beyond the early childhood classroom. Social skills should be assessed and instruction targeted to meet the needs of the individual. Due to an increase of

students with challenging behaviors, educators must seek out new ways to help all students be successful. Early childhood educators have the important role of laying the foundation of social emotional learning that will help children achieve academic success.

### **Standards-Based Practices**

The development of the Common Core national standards for K-12 education led to states creating early learning standards. Since 2002, every state has developed and adopted early learning standards. According to Early Childhood Iowa (2017), the Iowa Early Learning Standards, originally created in 2003, were updated in 2012 and aligned to the Iowa Common Core kindergarten standards. The Iowa Early Learning Standards address learning standards for children birth to five years of age. These standards cover seven content areas all related to the growth and development of the young child.

Initially, learning standards for early childhood received push back from leaders in the field. Concerns emerged regarding how standards would affect best practice for early childhood education. High stakes testing related to No Child Left Behind made early childhood educators worry about pushdown curriculum. Kagan and Scott-Little (2004) found early childhood educators feared high stakes testing and any type of curriculum that attempted to “standardize” child development. An important premise of child development is that it occurs on a continuum. Any effort to assess the continuum that disallows for a spectrum of skills and behaviors was rejected by educators.

There is growing pressure to have children enter kindergarten ready for rigorous curriculum. How early childhood programs respond to this pressure is important. As reported by Moyer (2017), many preschools are changing from play-based, child-driven learning to direct instruction. Unfortunately, this is contrary to what is known about how children learn. Indeed, Barblett, Knaus and Barratt-Pugh (2016) state that play is of paramount importance when looking at early childhood education and its foundational ideas. Play-based, child-centered

curriculum is the gold standard for quality programming. It is the fundamental way children acquire depth of knowledge while engaged in multiple facets of learning.

However, it is not the standards themselves that are the issue. Early childhood educators with strong ideas about developmentally appropriate pedagogy understand the importance of standards-based instruction. Implementation in the early childhood classroom need not, nor should it, mimic later instructional practices. As reported by Kagan and Scott-Little (2004), in every case in the research, standards were created to improve instruction and provide a framework to allow for more deliberate instruction. This is in clear keeping with the goals of all professional educators. Professionals welcome accountability as well as the ability to provide appropriate learning opportunities.

In 2004, Kagan and Scott-Little identified barriers to standards-based instruction in early childhood education which included issues related to instructional sequence, assessment to drive decision making and observation and recording of skills. These remain issues with early childhood educators and beginning the process of addressing such issues is the goal of this review. A warning from Kagan, Britto and Engle (2005) states that America's focus on the latest trend can be a barrier to deepening understanding of the standards-based teaching process for early childhood. Internationally, countries are using similar standards to create rich curriculum that allows for the spectrum of development of young children. This provides the basis for hope that with effort, standards-based curriculum is within reach for the early childhood educator.

A crucial aspect of curriculum development is assessment. Assessments in the early childhood setting should be authentic and directly related to the standards. As stated by Grisham-Brown, Hallam and Brookshire (2006), preschool assessments can be classified as observation, interview or direct assessment. The researchers suggest educators set up two assessments per week, allow students free access to materials and observe students engaging with materials. By limiting the assessments required per week, educators can move toward standards-based assessment without being overwhelmed with new practices.

Although specific vocabulary may vary, inquiry-based, play-based and child-led are frequent themes when researching early childhood curriculum. Kangas, Venninen and Ojala (2016) stress the importance of giving children a voice in the classroom. Children should be viewed as competent participants in the school day. These ideas present challenges when designing curriculum. Curriculum needs to be broad and flexible to allow children's ideas and expressions to guide topics. However, all learning standards need to be addressed. Scaffolded play is also critical to early childhood education. Opportunities should be embedded in the curriculum. According to Moyer (2017), one of the reasons scaffolded play in the early childhood setting is so critical is because children no longer have vast amounts of free play outside of school in mixed aged groups. Whereas in the past, children learned new ideas about understood concepts from older children, now educators must fill that role. Educators provide the next bit of information, through play, that increases a child's understanding of a previously learned concept or idea. Charlesworth (2005) speaks directly to scaffolding when specifically discussing early mathematics standards, identifying scaffolding as one of the important ways, along with exploration, that children gain mathematical concepts.

Across curriculum, scaffolded play is an important aspect of curriculum development.

While researching project-based learning, Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel and Rathkey (2008) noted that standards can be fitted to preschool study projects. This somewhat backwards approach supports child-led learning and standards-based instruction. According to Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley and Neil (2008), educators should use professional development to play with materials together to identify how materials fit with standards. By previously interacting with materials with others, educators can match materials with the standards they want to focus on. Whatever the approach, curriculum written needs to be under broad, basic ideas of general interest to young children and should address all early learning standards required by the individual state.

**Impact**

The purpose of this literature review was program improvement. The topics covered herein relate directly to the early childhood program seeking improvement. The early childhood program is located in a rural, low socioeconomic status area. As the program is relatively young (five years old), a formal curriculum has not been established. Focus of staff has been growing the program, which now contains four sections serving two to five-year-old children. Children on individualized education plans are served within the general education environment. The program has one unified classroom in which the educator serves as both the general and special education teacher. This educator serves all special education students in other sections within the general education setting in which they have been placed.

One goal of the early childhood program is to be nationally recognized for excellence in the field of early childhood education. Excellent standards-based curriculum is one aspect of achieving this goal. Another topic important to the program is how children are educated. The information gleaned in this literature review reinforces the inclusive practice of the early childhood program. The early childhood educator strongly believes that inclusive practice is a human right and that exclusive practice such as the resource model should be the exception, not the rule. Curriculum will be developed with the three-tier approach in mind: basic instruction, students who need more reinforcement and support and children who required individualized education.

To accomplish the goal of creating standards-based curriculum, it will be important that information be disseminated to all stakeholders. This will take place in several ways. To start, information from this literature review will be presented during program professional development opportunities throughout the 2017-18 school year. Administration will be provided with the literature review and provide approval for the professional development before the process begins. The target audience will be the administration, educators, and support staff employed at the early childhood program. The four licensed educators and multiple support

staff provide education for children age two through five years in four classrooms. All staff will be presented with key information regarding themes from this review at whole staff professional development sessions twice a month. During the first meeting, all topics will be presented and a vote will decide the order of the topic discussions. This is a valuable step to help ensure buy-in from all members on the early childhood team. Information will be shared in a Google Slide Show format in order to allow notes to be added and topic discussions based on the feedback provided from each member of the team. The first challenge for the presenter will be to outline the key reasons quality curriculum is necessary for program improvement. Sagor and Rickey (2012) identify a shared vision as an imperative function to successful leadership. Stakeholders who share the program vision will be compelled to follow through with the important work of curriculum creation. As information is relayed throughout the academic school year, questions, thoughts and ideas can be deliberated as a team.

Part of this plan will include a book study amongst the educators. Using *Rigorous Curriculum Design*, by Larry Ainsworth the lead educator for this project will begin to guide teaching staff through the process of curriculum development. Following Ainsworth's step-by-step process, the educators will begin to create units of study based on the Iowa Early Learning Standards. This process will begin with the Social and Emotional Development section, as the importance of this area was established during the literature review. Benchmarks from other standards will be fitted into the new units of study. This is expected to be a process that will span at least three years. The purpose is to create excellent standards-based curriculum that will best serve the population of students in the program.

The early childhood program already has established family nights every other month. These involve a time for shared activities for families, short parent education sessions in which children are otherwise occupied and a community meal. Next year, a Google Slide Show outlining the goals for the program, as well as the importance of standards-based curriculum will be added. This will be a crucial discourse, as there have been misunderstandings, district-wide,

among parents of attending students. Just as educators who gain more understanding are more open to new ideas, so are parents. By providing this information to parents of such young children, a foundation of understanding will be laid that will provide parents, important stakeholders within the school district, deeper understanding of district educational practices. There will also be additional information about program philosophy shared at each family fun night to begin to better educate all stakeholders about the purpose and goals of the program. It is the hope that better information regarding the early childhood program will lead to stronger feelings of ownership and community for families.

Staff meetings at the early childhood center provide another opportunity to share information regarding the literature review. Information regarding curriculum and themes outlined herein will be synthesized and shared with teaching and support staff. Developments on curriculum will be presented with all staff; input will be collected and modifications will be considered. These meetings will provide opportunity for all staff, certified and noncertified, to become familiar with curriculum changes. In the preschool setting, learning is child-led and scaffolded by the adults in the room. When all staff have clear knowledge and understanding of the details of curriculum, they are better able to scaffold the learning using appropriate language, vocabulary and concepts.

In addition to the sharing of information, the staff of the early childhood program will engage in a book study. *Engaging Students With Poverty in Mind*, by Eric Jensen, will be the focus literature for the first book study. Early childhood program teaching and support staff are expected to delve into issues pertaining to education and poverty based on discussions over concepts and topics outlined in the book. According to the Iowa Department of Education website (2016), the district in which the early childhood program is located has a student population of forty-eight percent who qualify for free and reduced meals and ten percent of the student population received special education services. The percentage of students living in poverty who attend the early childhood program is closer to eighty percent, as determined by the

number of students who qualify for state funding tied to family income. These high percentages underscore the need for the early childhood program to develop understanding regarding the issues of poverty that lead to improved educational practices that engage all learners.

For future study, reasons for the high percentage of students receiving special education services should be investigated. It is recommended that the percentage of student population that receives special education services should be three percent or less. However, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) reports national percentages of students receiving special education services have remained between eight and thirteen percent from 1975-2014. Investigation into the reason students are receiving services would help identify if there is a discrepancy related to poverty, or a high number of students with diagnosed disabilities. Investigations into special education and the district can occur later.

### **Conclusion**

The first five years of life are a time of rapid growth and development. Early childhood programs support this development in many ways. The field of early childhood education has evolved through the past decades. Ideas and information regarding growth and development have expanded and ameliorated. Educators understand the important role early education plays in a child's overall learning. High quality early education not only supports the developing child, but leads to greater educational outcomes over time. Children who attend preschool have lower dropout rates and achieve greater educational outcomes than peers who do not attend a quality early learning program. Early educators have a vast influence over a child's future success. The importance of access for all young children to quality early childhood education cannot be overstated.

Developing appropriate social emotional skills is a critical goal for young children. The ability to self-regulate is a strong predictor of future school success. Young children need opportunities to practice social emotional skills in a safe setting with adult support, as necessary. Children must be taught the language that is most effective when negotiating and

collaborating with others: both adults and peers. Background knowledge and language for negotiating social interactions varies from child to child. However, the ability to communicate and work with others will be crucial for the type of collaborative work required in modern outcomes-based education. Responsive classrooms provide opportunities for children of all skill levels to interact with peers and adults. Strong curriculum ensures educators cover all areas of social emotional learning.

Early intervention and inclusive practice are important aspects of early childhood education. Curriculum that teaches all three tiers of learners supports inclusive practices for children with disabilities. The literature supports inclusion for early childhood education, but cautions educators may require further training and information regarding meeting the needs of all learners within the general education classroom. When provided with additional training regarding inclusive practices, educators are more likely to buy-in to the idea of educating all children in the same classroom. Inclusive practices not only lead to greater educational outcomes for all learners, it reinforces the belief that all students are worthy of the same educational opportunities.

Developing curriculum appropriate for the early childhood program is a complex task. There are many issues that must be considered throughout the process. The purpose of this literature review is to identify topics important to the early childhood program located in a rural area with high numbers of children living in poverty. Information in this review will be used to make program improvements, including the development of strong curriculum. Creating curriculum for the early childhood education program presents many challenges. Learning is play-based, and yet must include formative and summative assessments, opportunities to learn organically through play with adult scaffolding and must contain all Iowa Learning Standards. The challenge of curriculum creation will take time and input from program stakeholders. By creating quality, standards-based curriculum and improving the early childhood program,

students attending will achieve the greatest educational outcomes that will lead to future educational success.

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