

# ED436298 1999-12-00 Curriculum Disputes in Early Childhood Education. ERIC Digest.

ERIC Development Team

[www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

## Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

|  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| <a href="#">Curriculum Disputes in Early Childhood Education. ERIC Digest.....</a> | <a href="#">1</a> |
| <a href="#">WHY HAS THE ACADEMIC APPROACH GROWN IN POPULARITY?.....</a>            | <a href="#">2</a> |
| <a href="#">HOW CAN WE DISTINGUISH ACADEMIC FROM INTELLECTUAL GOALS?.....</a>      | <a href="#">3</a> |
| <a href="#">DOES RESEARCH FAVOR CONSTRUCTIVISM OR INSTRUCTIVISM?.....</a>          | <a href="#">3</a> |
| <a href="#">WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN'S INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT?....</a>                | <a href="#">4</a> |
| <a href="#">WHAT TEACHING METHODS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S INTELLECTUAL.....</a>         | <a href="#">4</a> |
| <a href="#">FOR MORE INFORMATION.....</a>  | <a href="#">5</a> |



**ERIC Identifier:** ED436298

**Publication Date:** 1999-12-00

**Author:** Katz, Lilian G.

**Source:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education  
Champaign IL.

## Curriculum Disputes in Early Childhood Education. ERIC Digest.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

Disputes concerning curriculum and teaching methods go back a long way in the field of early childhood education. Over the years, many different terms have been used to capture the opposing positions. In recent years, the term academic has come to describe those parts of the early childhood curriculum intended to help children master the basic skills involved in literacy and numeracy (Jacobson, 1996). From the academic--or instructivist--perspective, the young child is seen as dependent on adults' instruction in the academic knowledge and skills necessary for a good start for later academic achievement (see Katz, 1996).

This perspective is in direct contrast to the active and interactive curriculum assumed by proponents of the constructivist approach, who see young children as active constructors of knowledge; a major goal of a constructivist curriculum, then, is to provide ample opportunity for active construction of knowledge. This Digest considers instructivist and constructivist approaches to early childhood education and suggests that attention to children's intellectual development may inadvertently be overlooked by both sides. The main thesis here is that just because children are not engaged in formal academic instruction does not mean that what they are doing is sufficient to support their intellectual development.

## WHY HAS THE ACADEMIC APPROACH GROWN IN POPULARITY?

Several factors may account for increasing pressure to introduce children to academics (e.g., in literacy and numeracy skills) as early as the preschool and kindergarten years. One factor is the increasing demand and widening expectation that preschool and kindergarten programs ensure children's readiness for the next grade or class level. This phenomenon is part of a traditional tendency at every level of education to push down curriculum expectations from older to younger children.

Another factor may be that the traditional importance given to spontaneous play as young children's natural way to learn may seem less urgent today than a half a century ago when, for most children, opportunities and artifacts for play were less plentiful than today, especially in the home.

Much of the current contentiousness between the "instructivists" and "constructivists" revolves around the extent to which formal academic instruction may be appropriate or even essential for those young children whose early environments may not provide sufficient experiences for spontaneous informal learning of basics such as the alphabet and the names of colors and shapes.

On the constructivist side, it is assumed that child- initiated exploration, well "scaffolded" by adults, is the developmentally appropriate way to support children's learning. By contrast, those favoring a large component of formal instruction in basic academic skills put children in a passive-receptive role of internalizing the transmitted knowledge and systematically practicing the literacy and numeracy skills to be learned.

It is useful to keep in mind that today most classes offer some mix or blend of these two positions.

## HOW CAN WE DISTINGUISH ACADEMIC FROM INTELLECTUAL GOALS?

Academic tasks are typically carefully structured, sequenced, and decontextualized small bits of information that often require some small group or individual instruction by a knowledgeable adult. They include exercises designed to help achieve mastery of tasks. The academic tasks in the early childhood curriculum usually address facts and skills that the majority of children are unlikely to learn spontaneously or by discovery, although under favorable conditions, many children do so. These tasks frequently involve memorizing lists or symbols, responding to questions that have correct answers, and practicing routine tasks that can be assessed as right or wrong.

Intellectual goals, on the other hand, address dispositions, that is, habits of mind that include a variety of tendencies to interpret experience (Katz, 1993). The intellectual dispositions include the dispositions to make sense of experience, to theorize about causes and effects, to hypothesize explanations to account for observations, and to analyze and synthesize whatever information is available. These dispositions can be seen when children are engaged in investigations of things around them in the course of which they persist in seeking answers to their questions and solutions to the problems they encounter. Examples of these intellectual dispositions are shown vividly in Beneke's (1998) report of a preschool car project and in the "Shoe & Meter" project of the children in Reggio Emilia (Reggio Children, 1997).

## DOES RESEARCH FAVOR CONSTRUCTIVISM OR INSTRUCTIVISM?

More than half a century ago, Dorothy Gardner (1942) attempted to put to rest once and for all a similar controversy raging at that time about curriculum and teaching methods by conducting a comparative study of two nursery schools. School A was characterized by what would be called today "developmentally appropriate practice," emphasizing creativity and spontaneous play. School B was characterized by formal teacher-directed activities, now commonly referred to as "academic" in focus. Despite Gardner's findings in favor of School A, the debate over curriculum and methods resumed barely a generation later.

In the past 20 years, similar comparative studies have been reported (see, for example, Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Marcon, 1992, 1995). The results of these studies have been somewhat mixed, though generally close to Gardner's earlier findings that those children enrolled in preschools on the constructivist side of the dichotomy fare better in school in the long run-- especially the boys (Miller & Bizzell, 1983; Marcon, 1992). Longitudinal studies comparing "instructivist" and "constructivist" approaches suggest that the early gains of children in the "instructivist" preschool curricula do not last more than a year or two.

## WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN'S INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT?

One of the major concerns about this historical squabbling over goals and methods is that both sides in the struggle may overlook curriculum and teaching methods beyond the traditional dichotomy. Years of experience of observing early childhood classrooms suggest that both sides under- emphasize and undervalue a third option--namely, curriculum and teaching methods that address children's intellectual development as distinct from the instructivist emphasis on academic learning and the constructivist emphasis on children's play and self-initiated learning.

Constructivist theory does not neglect children's intellectual development; however, constructivist theory is sometimes misinterpreted. Believing that children "construct their own knowledge," some adults do little more than set out a variety of activities that children enjoy, while studiously avoiding formal instruction in basic academic skills. Indeed, it is not surprising that observers of nonacademic preschool and kindergarten classes who have little knowledge of young children (e.g., E. D. Hirsch, Jr.) criticize "progressive" and "constructivist" classes as banal, vacuous, overemphasizing play and fun, and wasteful of children's capacities.

At the same time, a strong academic approach may undermine the disposition to use the knowledge and skills so intensely instructed. The disposition to be readers or, similarly, to be ready users of mathematical concepts and skills often painfully acquired may be damaged by premature instruction, given the amount of drill and practice usually required for success in mastering these skills at an early age.

## WHAT TEACHING METHODS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S INTELLECTUAL

DEVELOPMENT? An appropriate curriculum addresses strengthening and using the intellectual dispositions, offers good processes about rich content, and results in high-quality products. For these reasons, many teachers have been incorporating project work into the curriculum (Katz & Chard, 1989; Beneke, 1998). Project work not

only provides contexts for the intellectual dispositions involved in the investigations that children undertake, but it also provides texts and pretexts for children to make meaningful and functional use of the academic skills they are taught during the "instructive" part of the curriculum. Thus, we might "trichotomize" the early childhood curriculum so that it is focused on at least a trio of goals: (1) social/emotional development and (2) intellectual development and (3) the acquisition of meaningful and useful academic skills.

Excellent examples of meaningful long-term projects in which children's intellects as well as growing academic skills flourish can be seen in the work of the children in the preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Reggio Children, 1997), as well as in reports of projects by Beneke (1998) and Helm (1998). These works demonstrate that young children can express their intellectual dispositions in the pursuit of serious topics and apply their emerging and academic skills and generate high-quality products simultaneously.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Beneke, S. (1998). REARVIEW MIRROR. REFLECTIONS ON A PRESCHOOL CAR PROJECT. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. ED 424 977.

Consortium for Longitudinal Studies. (1983). AS THE TWIG IS BENT: LASTING EFFECTS OF PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. ED 253 299.

Gardner, Dorothy E. M. (1942). TESTING RESULTS IN THE INFANT SCHOOL. London: Methuen.

Helm, Judy (Ed.). (1998). THE PROJECT APPROACH CATALOG 2. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. ED 424 036.

Jacobson, L. (1996). Guidelines seek to define role of academics in children's play. EDUCATION WEEK, 26(13), 1, 28.

Katz, L. G. (1993). DISPOSITIONS: DEFINITIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTICE. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. ED 360 104.

Katz, L. G. (1996, March) Balancing constructivism and Instructivism in the early childhood curriculum. The Annual Maya Zuck Lecture in Early Childhood Education Series. Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

Katz, L. G., & Chard, S. C. (1989). ENGAGING CHILDREN'S MINDS. THE PROJECT APPROACH. Stamford, CT: Ablex. ED 407 074.

Marcon, R. A. (1992). Differential effects of three preschool models on inner-city 4-year-olds. *EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH QUARTERLY*, 7(4), 517-530. EJ 458 104.

Marcon, R. A. (1995). Fourth-grade slump: The cause and cure. *PRINCIPAL*, 74(5), 6-17,19-20. EJ 502 896.

Miller, Louise B., & Bizzell, Rondeall P. (1983). Long-term effects of four preschool programs: Sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. *CHILD DEVELOPMENT*, 54(3), 727-741. EJ 284 356.

Reggio Children. (1997). *SHOE AND METER. CHILDREN AND MEASUREMENT. FIRST APPROACHES TO THE DISCOVERY, FUNCTION, AND USE OF MEASUREMENT.* Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

Schweinhart, L. J., Barnes, H. V., & Weikart, D. P. (1993). *SIGNIFICANT BENEFITS: THE HIGH/SCOPE PERRY PRESCHOOL STUDY THROUGH AGE 27* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 10). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press. ED 366 433.

Schweinhart, L. J., & Weikart, D. P. (1997). The High/Scope preschool curriculum comparison study through age 23. *EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH QUARTERLY*, 12(2), 117-143. EJ 554 350.

-----

References identified with an ED (ERIC document), EJ (ERIC journal), or PS number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 900 locations worldwide, and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses such as UnCover (800-787-7979) or ISI (800-523-1850).

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0020. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.

#### ABOUT ERIC/EECE DIGESTS...

ERIC/EECE Digests are short reports on topics of current interest in education. Digests are targeted to teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers, and other practitioners. They are designed to provide an overview of information on a given topic and references to items that provide more detailed information. Reviewed by subject experts who are content specialists in the field, the digests are funded by the Office of

Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education.

All ERIC/EECE Digests are available free in original printed form directly from the clearinghouse. For additional information on this topic, please contact ERIC/EECE directly at ericeece@uiuc.edu or 1-800-583-4135.

---

**Title:** Curriculum Disputes in Early Childhood Education. ERIC Digest.

**Document Type:** Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

**Available From:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 51 Gerty Dr., Campaign, IL 61820-7469. Tel: 800-583-4135 (Toll Free). For full text: <http://ericeece.org>.

**Descriptors:** Academic Achievement, Constructivism (Learning), Curriculum Design, Curriculum Development, Developmentally Appropriate Practices, Early Childhood Education, Educational Objectives, Educational Strategies, Intellectual Development, Preschool Curriculum, Student Centered Curriculum, Student Projects, Teaching Methods

**Identifiers:** Academically Oriented Preschool Program, ERIC Digests, Project Approach (Katz and Chard)

###



[\[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page\]](#)