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Beginnings Workshop

think before you (inter)act: what it means to be an intentional teacher

by Ann S. Epstein



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The heated debate over child-initiated versus adult-directed instruction may be cooling down, replaced by a search for balance. In the landmark report Eager to Learn, the National Research Council (2000) emphasized the need for both approaches, and said teachers must play an active and intentional role in each type of learning:

"Children need opportunities to initiate activities and follow their interests, but teachers are not passive during these [child]-initiated and directed activities. Similarly, children should be actively engaged and responsive during teacher-initiated and -directed activities. Good teachers help support the child's learning in both types of activities" (pp. 8-9).

While most of us claim to act with 'intention' in our dealings with young children, it is worth pausing to reflect on what this term means. In *The Intentional Teacher*, the author of this article says, "intentional teaching means teachers act with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children's development and learning. Teachers must know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that individual children learn and the specific content they are learning" (Epstein, 2007, p. 1).

How do we know which strategy to use? As a general rule, in child-guided learning, teachers provide materials but children make connections on their own or through interactions with peers. Adult-guided learning involves materials and experiences children are less likely to encounter on their own, systems of knowledge they cannot create on their own, responses to requests for help, and evidence that children are ready to move up a level but are unsure how (see sidebar).

This division is not rigid, and research together with our own observations can help guide our practice.

The Role of the Intentional Teacher in Child-Guided and Adult-Guided Learning

Intentional teachers support child-guided learning when children:

- Investigate how things work by actively exploring materials, actions, and ideas
- Establish relationships on their own
- Turn to one another for assistance
- Are motivated to solve problems on their own
- Are so focused that adult intervention would interrupt them
- Challenge themselves and one another to master new skills
- Apply and extend existing knowledge in new ways

Intentional teachers use adult-guided learning when children:

- Are unaware their actions may be unsafe or hurtful
- Have not encountered materials or experiences elsewhere
- Cannot create systems of knowledge (e.g., letter names)
- Are not aware of something likely to interest them (e.g., the smell of flowers)
- Do not engage with something they need for further learning (e.g., shape names in geometry)
- Ask for information or help, especially after trying several unsuccessful solutions on their own

Nevertheless, effectively supporting different types of learning can be a challenge, particularly as we address not only academic subjects (reading, math, and science), but also the content — knowledge and

skills — embedded in social-emotional, physical, and creative development. For example, we agree preschoolers need to grasp the 'alphabetic principle' but may be unsure about how to help them learn letters without drilling them. We want children to appreciate different artistic styles, but not by leading them in a 'compare and contrast' exercise.

In the rest of this article, we explain how to turn best intentions into best practices in five areas of early learning. The two examples in each area (child- and adult-guided strategies, respectively) can help us think before we (inter)act with children. Knowing how and what we want young children to learn, and applying this knowledge to practice, is what intentional teaching is about.

Language and literacy

Child-guided learning: Conversational skills. Children learn to listen, initiate, and respond in conversation with others. This verbal facility is a foundation of literacy development. To promote these essential skills:

- Be careful not to dominate when talking with children. Lean toward more child than adult talk.
- Model active listening. Wait for children to form and express their thoughts. Get down on their level, make eye contact, repeat or clarify what they say to show you have heard them.
- Play games with verbal directions, such as Simon Says (but without winners and losers).
- Expand children's verbalizations. For example, if a toddler says, "Me, banana," you might say, "You are going to eat that banana."
- Support sociodramatic play by providing props for role playing and pretending.
- Pretend to misunderstand ambiguous gestures to encourage children to add words. Use humor. For example, if a child points to his/her head for help with a hat, put a shoe there instead.
- Use questions but not in excess. Ask questions that encourage children to think and expand their answers. Avoid questions that have a single brief or 'correct' answer.
- Talk to other adults in the presence of children. Model good syntax and varied vocabulary.

Adult-guided learning: Vocabulary. The number of words young children can understand and say (receptive and expressive vocabulary, respectively) depends on the language they hear. To help build their vocabularies:

- Talk with children throughout the day, using words that describe the materials, actions, people, and events in their lives. Vary experiences (e.g., go on field trips) to introduce new words.
- Read books that are rich in vocabulary and interesting ideas to spark questions and discussion.
- When you use words that are new to children, provide familiar synonyms and definitions. Put the words in context, e.g., "We debated whether to put the markers in the writing or art area."
- Encourage children to describe materials (attribute words), how they use them (action words), how they move (direction words), and what they think and feel (idea and emotion words).
- Describe your own intentions and actions, e.g., "I'm going to the house area to see what's cooking for lunch. It smells sweet and spicy!"

Mathematics and science

Child-guided learning: Orienting things in space. Understanding where objects are located and their relationship to one another is the foundation of geometry. To develop these concepts:

- Create different types of spaces in the classroom and outdoors, including small spaces to crawl around in, large open areas to move freely, and things to go over, under, around, and through.
- Provide construction toys (e.g., blocks, boards), and ample space and time to play with them.
- Provide other materials children can move and rearrange such as doll house furniture, and shelves and pedestals for displaying their artwork.

Adult-guided learning: Understanding position, location, direction, and distance concepts. Preschoolers are beginning to view people and objects from perspectives other than their own. To help them apply these concepts in concrete ways:

- Make comments and ask questions that focus on spatial relationships, e.g., "You jumped over the book and crawled under the table"; "Where will your road turn when it reaches the wall?"
- Provide opportunities for children to represent things by drawing, building, and moving, e.g., the three bears sitting at the table. Children can also

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make and interpret simple maps of familiar things, such as how the classroom is arranged.
- Create occasions for children to give directions, e.g., while leading others at large-group time.

Social-emotional development

Child-guided learning: Developing a sense of community. A community is a social group with common interests, whose members receive and give one another support. To build community in the classroom:

- Create an atmosphere in which children are expected to be kind and supportive. Use phrases such as 'our class' and 'all of us.'
- Arrange the room to include open areas where large groups can assemble and enclosed areas conducive to intimate interactions.
- Establish a consistent daily routine. A shared schedule creates a sense of togetherness.
- Organize group activities so children who opt to play alone at choice time have an opportunity to interact with their peers. Encourage but never pressure or require children to join the group.

Adult-guided learning: Creating and participating in a democracy. Democracy is treating others with respect and equality. It entails compromise and negotiation, skills young children are beginning to develop. To help them apply these social ideals in concrete (not abstract) ways:

- Encourage children to consider alternatives to reach a goal and anticipate consequences, e.g., "Can you think of another way to do that?" "What if they run through the block area again?"
- Build children's skills in perspective and turn-taking. Ask them to repeat back what they hear before adding their own ideas. Use role play to encourage adopting other viewpoints.
- Acknowledge (rather than praise) when you see children working together. Comment on how teamwork can help everyone reach their individual and collective goals, e.g., "You helped each other put away the heavy boards. Now we can all get ready for outside time!"
- Deal evenly with all parties in a conflict, including children who act aggressively. They do not intend to be 'bad' but have not yet learned how to satisfy their needs in more acceptable ways.

Physical movement

Child-guided learning: Stability skills — turning, twisting, bending, stretching, swinging, swaying, pushing/pulling, rising/falling. Most stability skills develop through exploration and discovery. To encourage children's spontaneous interests in these movements:

- Provide equipment to practice these skills, including wide ramps and beams (on the floor or close to the ground), push and pull toys, rocking toys, swings, and wheeled vehicles.
- Offer cues to perform specific skills. For example, cues for bending include spreading your legs, holding out your arms, and bending in stages to keep your balance. Rather than direct children, use yourself as an example, e.g., "I find it easier to bend if I hold out my arms."
- Incorporate stability skills in large-group activities, e.g., ask children to suggest body parts to bend and straighten as they move to the beat of the music.
- Challenge children to extend a movement, e.g., "I wonder how we could stretch just one side of our bodies."

Adult-guided learning: Stability skills — transferring weight, balancing, jumping/landing, rolling. Children who have mastered simple stability skills are ready to tackle more difficult ones with adult guidance and support. To help them develop these foundational skills:

- Provide equipment to promote these skills, including narrower but still low ramps and beams, things to jump over (string, tape), and inclined mats for rolling.
- Offer cues to perform specific skills. For example, cues for rolling like a log include keeping your legs together and your arms at your sides or over your head. Use yourself as an example, e.g., demonstrate or say, "When I roll, I try to keep my arms against my sides."
- Give stability challenges and encourage children to invent their own, e.g., "Roll as if your legs were glued together," or "What's another way we could roll? Gina says to roll in a circle."
- Build on children's interests and imagination. Design a balance trail using equipment children enjoy walking on. Act out a group story that involves these skills, e.g., searching for buried treasure on a

stormy sea, jumping onto safe land, rolling away from 'sharks' in the water.

Visual art

Child-guided learning: Making simple representations. Young children represent things with one or two details of interest to them, and are often not concerned about accuracy. To respect and support their artistic intentions:

- Accept what children create and do not ask them to include more detail. They may interpret this request as disapproval and lose interest or motivation.
- Show interest in the details children do include. Comment on their features and how children created them, e.g., "You drew a big red circle with a smaller blue one inside."
- Never presume to know what a child is representing — or even that they are representing anything. It is easy to misinterpret their artwork. Instead, invite them to tell you about it.

Adult-guided learning: Making complex representations. Just as children's language becomes more complex, so does their visual art. They add more details, strive for accuracy, and reflect more aspects of their individual and social lives. To help them execute their ideas:

- Encourage children to observe and describe things in detail, even when they are not making art. Use pictures and photographs to help them view things from different perspectives.
- Call attention to the artwork of others, both artists and peers. Do not worry about children 'copying' images or techniques. They will use what they see to carry out their own ideas.
- Provide opportunities for teamwork and collaborative art activities. As each child contributes something (an idea, an image, a technique), it opens up possibilities for the others.
- Label and store 'works-in-progress' so children can elaborate them on subsequent days.
- Display and discuss children's artwork. Sharing their art with peers, parents, and others helps children think about what and how they made each work, and inspires them to try new things.

Intentional teaching respects the importance and excitement children attach to their own learning. It also recognizes the significance of what we do as professionals. Teaching with intentionality requires that we be knowledgeable about child development, curriculum models, observational assessment, and proven instructional strategies. Being an intentional teacher both challenges and enables us to join with young children in discovering and inventing the world.

References

Epstein, A. S. (2007). *The intentional teacher: Choosing the best strategies for young children's learning.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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Child-guided vs. adult-directed — is the debate over?: Epstein says the debate between child-initiated and teacher-directed teaching is being replaced with a more balanced approach. Do you and your teachers agree? Talk with teachers about the debate and come to your own conclusion about what a balanced approach means. Ask teachers to estimate the amount of each kind of teaching and learning that goes on in their classroom and see if it reflects this new idea in best practices.

How do you know which strategy to use?: Good question! And Epstein helps you find the answer for your program. To help teachers understand when to intervene with adult-guided learning, videotape a segment of the classroom day for teaching teams to review on their own. See if they can identify times in the video that opportunities for child-initiated learning were missed as well as when opportunities for adult-guided learning were overlooked. Work with the teams to develop strategies for capturing these lost opportunities in the future.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

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