

families speak a different language at home to learn English while continuing to learn their home language. Competence in two languages will allow children to become adults who can contribute to both the global economy and their local communities. Preschool programs can best support young children by planning curriculum that fosters English-language development and keeps the children connected to the language of their families.

### ***Socioeconomic status***

Approximately 20 percent of children in California under the age of five live in families whose income is below the poverty level.<sup>13</sup> Compared with other states, California ranks 20<sup>th</sup> in the nation in the number of children under age eighteen living in poverty.<sup>14</sup> According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, younger children (birth to six years) are more likely to live in a low-income household.<sup>15</sup> Young children of immigrant parents are 20 percent more likely to live in a low-income family compared with children with native-born English-speaking parents. Young African American, Latino, and Native American children in California are also more likely to live in very low-income families compared with white children.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Children with disabilities or other special needs***

There are approximately 45,000 children with identified disabilities in the CDE preschool system. This number does not include children at risk of a disability or developmental challenges. Children with disabilities represent the diversity of California's entire preschool population and necessitate unique educational considerations in the preschool setting. Three-, four-, and five-year-old children with identified disabilities have

individualized education programs (IEPs) that reflect the CDE's preschool learning foundations. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), all children must have access to the general curriculum and have their progress measured accordingly.<sup>17</sup> In California, the CDE's preschool learning foundations serve as a guide for curriculum planning. Together, the foundations and curriculum framework offer a comprehensive approach to planning access to inclusive learning opportunities for all children.

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## **Overarching Principles**

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**E**ight principles have guided the development of this curriculum framework. Grounded in early childhood research and practice, the following eight principles emphasize offering young children individually, culturally, and linguistically responsive learning experiences and environments:

- Relationships are central.
- Play is a primary context for learning.
- Learning is integrated.
- Intentional teaching enhances children's learning experiences.
- Family and community partnerships create meaningful connections.
- Individualization of learning includes all children.
- Responsiveness to culture and language supports children's learning.
- Time for reflection and planning enhances teaching.

The rationales for these principles follow.

### ***Relationships are central***

Relationships with others are at the center of young children's lives. Caring relationships with close family members

provide the base for young children to engage with others, to explore with confidence, to seek support when needed, and to view interactions with others as likely to be positive and interesting. Recognizing the power of early relationships, preschool teachers and programs build strong relationships with children and families. Just as important, preschool teachers nurture the social-emotional development of young children through those relationships. Research shows that healthy social-emotional development helps young children learn, for example, to sustain attention more easily, to make and maintain friendships, and to communicate needs and ideas. Under the guiding eye of teachers in close partnership with families, young children build their ability to engage in relationships with adults and other children. Preschool offers children a variety of opportunities for social interactions (with familiar adults, peers), group participation, and for cooperation and responsibility. A climate of caring and respect that promotes nurturing relationships between children and within the community of families supports children's learning in all domains.

### ***Play is a primary context for learning***

Play is at the heart of young children's explorations and their engagement in learning experiences.<sup>18</sup> During play, children maximize their attention span as they focus on self-selected activities that they regulate themselves. When children make their own choices, engage other children in interaction, and spend time amusing themselves on their own, they learn much about themselves, their own capabilities, and the world around them. At the preschool level, play and learning should be seamless. Children need to



be *engaged* to learn. As Zigler observes, children bring more than their brains to school.<sup>19</sup> When children's hearts and minds are engaged, adults can help them learn almost anything they are ready to learn. In a program where play is valued, children's interests, engagement, creativity, and self-expression are supported through a balance of child-initiated and teacher-guided activities. The environment reflects an appreciation for the value of pretend play, imaginary play, and dramatic play. Play not only provides the context for thinking, building knowledge, being attentive, solving problems, and increasing social skills, it also helps children to integrate their emotional experiences and internalize guidance from their teachers. For some children, it may be necessary to make special adaptations to create access to learning through self-initiated activities and play.

### ***Learning is integrated***

Learning engages young children in every possible way. Young children continually use all their senses and competencies to relate new experiences to prior experiences and try to understand things and create meaning. Their learning is integrated while often having a specific focus. For example, during book reading, children use their knowledge and thinking abilities, emotional responses, under-

standing of language, and the full range of experiences at home and in the community to make new connections and understand. Children come to preschool as experts about many things—among them, their families, their home language(s), and their belongings. When learning builds on what children know and allows them to expand their skills playfully, they are happy to participate in any learning experience or activity, to recite any rhyme, and to count any set. That is why offering children experiences that are personally meaningful and connected is so important. In addition, since children learn using all of their sensory modalities in an integrated way, it is essential to strengthen the modalities with which individual children need special help and build upon their areas of strength. Integrated learning is further described in the section titled Curriculum Planning.

### ***Intentional teaching enhances children's learning experiences***

Effective curriculum planning occurs when teachers are mindful of children's learning and are intentional or purposeful in their efforts to support it. In the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) publication titled *The Intentional Teacher*, Ann Epstein offers the following description:<sup>20</sup>

... the intentional teacher ... acts with knowledge and purpose to ensure that young children acquire the knowledge and skills (content) they need to succeed in school and in life. Intentional teachers use their knowledge, judgment, and expertise to organize learning experiences for children; when an unexpected situation arises ... they can recognize a teaching opportunity and are able to take advantage of it, too.

With an understanding of early learning and development, the teacher works to help young children reach the learn-

ing destinations identified by California's preschool learning foundations. The intentional teacher is flexible in order to accommodate differences in children's learning strengths and needs. Intentional teaching strategies span from planning learning environments, experiences, and routines to spontaneous responses suggested by the moment-to-moment focus of the children.

### ***Family and community partnerships create meaningful connections***

Strong connections with families grow from respecting and valuing diverse views, expectations, goals, and understandings families have for their children. Programs demonstrate respect for families by partnering with them to exchange information about their children's learning and development and to share ideas about how to support learning at home and at school. Partnerships with families extend to the community where the families live, come together, and support one another. Building connections to the surrounding community allows a program to become known and make use of community resources. Getting to know the community also gives teachers insights into the learning experiences and competencies that children bring to the preschool setting and informs efforts to make preschool meaningful and connected for children.

### ***Individualization of learning includes all children***

Each child is unique. Preschool teachers use their understanding of each child's blend of **temperament**, family and cultural experiences, language experiences, personal strengths, interests, abilities, and dispositions to support the child's learning and development.

Through recognizing and adapting to each child's individual development, teachers are able to offer learning experiences that are meaningful, connected, and developmentally attuned to each child. Creating a classroom environment in which all children feel welcome is important. When children with disabilities or other special needs are included, the partnership with families is especially important. The family is the primary bridge between the preschool staff and special services the child may be receiving. The family, teacher, and other program staff can team together and include other specialists in the preschool setting. Adapting to an individual child may mean modifying the learning environment to ". . . increase a child's access, potential and availability for learning through thoughtful organization of materials and space."<sup>21</sup> Specifically designed professional support and development opportunities, as well as specialized instructional strategies, can help teachers deliver individualized education and care to meet the needs of all the children in a program.

### ***Responsiveness to culture and language supports children's learning***

Responsive preschool programs create a climate of respect for each child's culture and language when teachers and other program staff partner and regularly communicate with family members. They work to get to know the cultural strengths each child brings to preschool. An essential part of being culturally and linguistically responsive is to value and support each child's use of home language, for "continued use and development of the child's home language will benefit the child as he or she acquires English."<sup>22</sup> Equally important are nurturing interactions with children and their families in which ". . . teachers

attempt, as much as possible, to learn about the history, beliefs, and practices of the children & families they serve. . . ."<sup>23</sup> In addition to being responsive to the cultural history, beliefs, values, ways of communicating, and practices of children and families, teachers create learning environments that include resources such as pictures, displays, and books that are culturally rich and supportive of a diverse population, particularly the cultures and languages of the children and families in their preschool setting.<sup>24, 25</sup> Community members add to the cultural richness of a preschool setting by sharing their art, music, dance, traditions, and stories.

### ***Time for reflection and planning enhances teaching***

Preschool teachers are professionals who serve an important role in society. In nurturing the development of young children, teachers engage in an ongoing process of observation, documentation and **assessment**, reflection and planning, and implementation of strategies in order to provide individualized learning experiences. As increasing numbers of children with diverse backgrounds, including disabilities, participate in preschool programs, it becomes essential to have collaboration, teaming, and communication to extend the benefits of preschool to all children. Curriculum planning requires time for teachers to reflect on children's learning and plan strategies that foster children's progress in building knowledge and mastering skills. Preschool programs that support intentional teaching allocate time in teachers' schedules to allow them to reflect and plan both individually and as a team. With appropriate support, teachers are able to grow professionally through a continuous process of learning together and exploring ways to be responsive to young children's learning interests and needs.