Beginnings Workshop

program practices that support intentionality in teaching

by Pam Schiller

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The key to being intentional is simply the act of thinking before doing. Intentional teachers think about all aspects of the learning environment from the arrangement of the classroom to the delivery of instruction prior to acting. Intentional teachers continue thinking as they move through the routines of their day. They are 'fully present' with students — giving thoughtful responses to the many questions and comments that occur spontaneously throughout the day. They are constantly monitoring their curriculum and are willing to make adaptations to lessons that fall short of gaining children's interest or do not have relevance.

Intentional teachers are knowledgeable about what constitutes 'best' practice in the early childhood classroom. They focus on developmental domains because they understand that domains define the way that children develop and are the foundation for lifetime learning. They make sure that students have daily experiences that support their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development. Intentional teachers weave content information (literacy, math, science, and so forth) into developmental domains as opposed to focusing on these areas at the expense of developmental domains.

Teaching is an art, using instinct and intuition, but it is also a science, requiring knowledge of research finding related to both human development and subject content. Intentional teachers blend art and science to achieve optimum outcomes for their students. They use their intuition to fine tune, but they base the core of their practices in scientific research.

Here are some practices that support intentional teaching.

Setting up the learning environment

The classroom environment sets the tone for learning. Making thoughtful decisions about the environment helps create a welcoming atmosphere where children will be motivated to learn.

- **Keep the learning environment cozy.** The size of the learning environment affects how children play and interact (Tegano, et al., 1996). Children feel large in comparison to their surroundings. Tegano suggests that when children feel large in relationship to classroom space they enter into more complex and prolonged periods of play. Maria Montessori supported this notion when she insisted that children have child-sized materials to work with and when she specifically identified small work areas in the classroom.

- **Reduce clutter.** The human brain receives between 35,000 and 42,000 bits of information every second — everything within the visual pathway, including the temperature, the feeling of clothing, smells of perfumes, and on and on. The brain is constantly trying to filter out most of these stimuli in order to focus on specific information. Overly decorated rooms and rooms that are cluttered with 'stuff' overload the brain and interfere with its ability to narrow information down to what is relevant. Make sure that in the learning environment there is a place that allows the 'eyes' to rest — a place void of stimuli. Place important information in front of learners and eliminate what is not important. Rotate materials to help reduce clutter.

Choosing curriculum

Curriculum when broadly defined is every experience children encounter in the learning environment. After all, in the early years, every experience, planned and unplanned and routine, is wiring brain structure and capacity. An intentional teacher's goal will be to make sure that each child has a minimum of one experience in each domain area, each day.

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- **Use routines effectively.** Routines help children feel safe. They use routines like adults use their watches. Routines help children judge time and feel in control because they know what comes next. Although routines are important they should not be rigid. If children take a special interest in examining seeds they find outdoors, an intentional teacher will take advantage of this opportunity and allow the interest to drive the activities even if outdoor time expires.

- **Know developmental continuums.** Learning builds on itself. Continuums help children take what they learn from one skill and apply it to the next. Intentional teachers understand the progression of skills. They build their curriculum continuums of skills. For example, in math, children have to have the proper vocabulary before they are able to sort and classify items by attributes. If Audrey doesn't know colors and shapes, she cannot possible sort items by colors and shapes.

- **Use the 'Windows of Opportunity' as a guide.** The 'Windows of Opportunity' (see box, p. 59) is a scientific framework that identifies neurological wiring opportunities. The windows open at birth and unfold chronologically up to puberty. An intentional teacher uses this framework to identify key moments when specific experiences will help children wire necessary lifelong skills in each developmental domain. When a window is missed, optimum wiring is diminished. The 'Windows of Opportunity' help define 'best practice' in the early childhood classroom.

Delivering information

Scientific research has provided a number of significant findings that allow knowledgeable teachers to optimize learning for children. When brain compatible strategies are used to deliver information, memory and alertness are increased and students are able to learn without losing the joy of learning.

- **Ensure that students feel safe.** The brain will always pay attention to safety and well-being before anything else. Learning is inhibited when children feel threatened. For example: if the room temperature is too hot or too cold; if children are tired or hungry; or, if they are fearful of the teacher, the results of failure, or another child; the ability to focus on instructional material is impaired.

- **Present information in ways that challenge children to use multiple senses.** The more senses that deliver information to the brain, the more likely the brain will attend to that specific information. Teach children using visual models, music, manipulatives, and concrete examples. When studying oranges, touch them, taste them, feel them, and smell them.

- **Nurture curiosity.** Curiosity is the fuel of learning. Children are born curious. Bring unusual items into the learning environment; for example, a boat motor part, a bird egg, a fungi, or strips of plastic tubing. Urge students to question, to explore, to experiment, and to compare. Encourage imagination and thinking outside the box. Invite children to create alternative endings to stories. Ask 'what if' questions. *What if there were only two colors?* Accept the non-traditional. Refrain from rote memorization.

- **Keep lessons short.** Just like eating six small meals a day is better for digestion of food, shorter, more frequent lessons are better for the 'digestion' of information. The brain can only hold on to a few pieces of data at one time. If students don't have an opportunity to process information (make sense of it and establish meaning for it) before additional information is introduced, it is likely that information will be lost. Brighter students have no trouble separating the important part of a lesson from the less important parts and then quickly moving forward to process it. Slower learners, however, can get easily bogged down. When they are overloaded with too many details, they get stuck.

- **Tap into prior knowledge.** When past learning is used as a springboard or a bridge to new information, the student has a head start on processing the new information. The brain is always searching for patterns. How is this new information similar to what I already know? Learning is the accommodation of new information that occurs when students are able to make sense of and establish meaning for that information.

- **Provide time for practice.** Practice allows learners to make sense of information. When they are able to apply ideas to real-life situations, they have a much better chance of remembering and conceptually understanding what they are learning. Practice requires feedback from the teacher and self-evaluation by the learner. This ensures that the practice is accurate. Practicing something the wrong way prolongs the time it takes for mastery.

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Windows of Opportunity

Window	Wiring Opportunity	Greatest Enhancement
Emotional Intelligence	0 - 48 months	4 years to puberty
Trust	0 - 14 months	
Impulse Control	16 - 48 months	
Social Development	0 - 48 months	4 years to puberty
Attachment	0 - 12 months	
Independence	18 - 36 months	
Cooperation	24 - 48 months	
Thinking Skills	0 - 48 months	4 years to puberty
Cause and Effect	0 - 16 months	
Problem-Solving	16 - 48 months	
Motor Development	0 - 24 months	2 years to puberty
Vision	0 - 24 months	2 years to puberty
Language Skills*	0 - 24 months	2 years to puberty
Early Sounds	4 - 8 months	8 months to puberty
Vocabulary	0 - 24 months	2 - 5 years

* The size of a child's vocabulary and his ability to discriminate sounds are considered by many researchers to be the best predictors of how easily he will learn to read.

Ramey, Craig T. and Sharon L. (1999) *Right From Birth*. Goddard Press, NY, 1999.

Nash, M. "Fertile Minds." *Time,* February 1997, 48-56.

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- **Encourage students to think about information in complex ways.** When topics are suitable for higher level processing, have students apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they learn. Each of these processes enhances and strengthens learning. These processes help students attach meaning and make connections to past learning, and in so doing they increase retention.

- **Keep learning active.** Children have short attention spans. They do most of their learning on their feet. Research suggests (Sousa, 2005) that when learning is interactive and active retention of information increases significantly. When children teach skills to their peers, they have a 90 percent chance of retaining the information. Hands-on learning increases retention by seventy-five percent.

When children are moving they are increasing their oxygen levels, which in turn fuels their neurotransmitters, which in turn increases their alertness. Sitting for long periods of time decreases oxygen and therefore inhibits alertness (Jensen, 2005).

Interacting with children

Teachers make a profound difference in whether a child will have a desire to learn and whether the information learned is valued and used or simply committed to memory. Children look to their teachers as role models. They strive to be recognized by their teachers. They strive to please. Every teacher, every caregiver, holds in his or her hands the power to shape a child's entire future. The teacher-child relationship can not be underestimated.

- **Build trust.** Trust is the foundation of social and emotional intelligence. Social and emotional intelligence are necessary for cognitive achievement. Trust develops as children begin to know that you will meet their needs. Trust develops over time.

- **Be 'fully present.'** Take the time to listen to each child's comments and statements. Respond as if their words are crucially important. We are born as fledglings. We need to be recognized and nourished by others. Nothing you are doing in the classroom is

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more important than children's need for interaction and recognition. Be there — fully there!

An intentional teacher will help develop intentional students. Intentional teachers make thoughtful choices about the classroom environment, curriculum activities, and student interactions. Intentional students make thoughtful choices about their participation in the classroom. They model the thoughtfulness demonstrated by their teacher. They think before they act. For example they might ask themselves, "Which center offers something that motivates my curiosity?" "What story do I prefer to hear?"

Every teacher's goal is to help children move forward in their educational journey. An intentional teacher has a map (knowledge of development and research) and a plan for this journey. The intentional teacher consults the map often, uses intuition to make detours when necessary, and always keeps his or her thinking on how to best pack each child's suitcase with the essential tools that will be needed for a joyful and productive journey.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

It's all there: Schiller gives programs a to-do list of ideas for improving intentionality with good programmatic practices. Start at the beginning of the article and work your way through each topic. You may be surprised at how much support for intentionality will result from your efforts.

One a day!: Convene teachers to assess their current curriculum plan to make sure children are getting at least one experience per day in each domain of development. Then, ask them to keep count of how many children participated in each of the planned experiences. Use the results to target children who are falling through the cracks.

Fully present — what does that really mean?: Use technology again here to see if teachers are fully present during their teaching. Videotape short segments of intentional teaching and let teachers self-evaluate their success at being fully present during the interaction. Repeat to see if things are changing based on the discoveries made.