



# **The Intentional Teacher**

Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning

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Washington, DC

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**The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning**  
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2006939553

ISBN: 978-1-928896-41-8

NAEYC Item #165

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# Introducing Intentional Teaching

Preschoolers Tony and Salima are sitting on the floor, playing with the acorns Salima collected at outside time. Salima divides the acorns evenly between them. Their teacher sits on the floor next to them. Tony piles his acorns together, while Salima forms a large circle with hers. Tony says, “Hey, you got more than me!” Salima responds, “No, I don’t. We each got the same.” The teacher wonders aloud how they could find out whether they have the same number, and the children suggest counting the acorns.

**Tony:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14. (He lines up his acorns in a row as he counts.)

**Salima:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14. (She also lines up her acorns in a row.)

**Teacher:** You each have 14.

**Tony:** Yeah. We got the same.

**Teacher:** (Spreads Tony’s acorns across the floor and puts Salima’s in a pile.) Now who has more?

**Tony:** (Smiles.) I do!

**Salima:** No, you don’t. We each got the same. See? (She counts her acorns and puts them in a row, then counts Tony’s acorns and puts them in a row as well.)

**Teacher:** (This time she puts Tony’s in a pile and spreads Salima’s out across the floor.) Now who has more?

**Tony:** (Thinks for a moment.) Nobody’s got more. We got the same!

**Salima:** (Smiles.) That’s what I said!

This book is about how the *intentional teacher*, like the teacher in this opening vignette, 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 teaching does not happen by chance; it is planful, thoughtful, and purposeful. Intentional teachers use their knowledge, judgment, and expertise to organize learning experiences for children; when an unexpected situation arises (as it always does), they can recognize a teaching opportunity and are able to take advantage of it, too.

Intentional teaching means teachers act with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children’s development and learning. “Academic” domains (literacy, mathematics, and science) as well as “traditional” early learning domains (social and emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative development) all have important knowledge and skills that young children want and need to master. Intentional teachers therefore integrate and promote meaningful learning in *all* domains.

Intentional teaching requires wide-ranging knowledge about how children typically develop and learn. Teachers must have a repertoire of instructional strategies and know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that individual children learn and the specific content they are learning. At some times or for some con-

tent, children seem to learn best from *child-guided experience*—that is, they acquire knowledge and skills through their own exploration and experience, including through interactions with peers. At other times and for other content, children seem to learn best from *adult-guided experience*—that is, in set-up situations in which their teachers introduce information, model skills, and the like. (See the box opposite.)

The division between what is child-guided and what is adult-guided experience is not a rigid one. Rarely does learning come about entirely through a child's efforts or only from adult instruction. In any given subject, how a child learns will vary over time. For example, young children begin to build their speaking and listening skills through spontaneous and natural conversations (child-guided experience). However, they also learn syntax and vocabulary from the adults around them, and teachers often make a point of introducing new words and structures (adult-guided). Children also differ individually in how they like to learn. Some do a lot of exploring and thinking through problems on their own, while others very readily ask adults for information or help. But every child learns in both modes.

Similarly, the division of content into the knowledge and skills that seem to be best acquired primarily through child-guided experience versus those through adult-guided experience is not an exact process. For example, in typically developing children, basic language abilities clearly are acquired largely through child-guided learning experience (albeit, with linguistic input from the adults around them); children are born with the capacity to hear and reproduce the sounds of speech and are inherently motivated, as social beings, to communicate with others. By contrast, identifying the letters of the alphabet is something that children cannot do intuitively; as arbitrary creations of a culture, letter forms and their names clearly are learned in adult-guided experience. In other content areas, the division is not so clear. But even in cases where assignment to "primarily child-guided" versus "primarily adult-guided" is more difficult, knowledgeable

educators can make a determination that most will agree on. I found this consensus in consulting with my expert informants for this book.

These divisions are imprecise. But it is still useful for teachers to consider when and how to support children's own discovery and construction of knowledge, and when and how to convey content in teacher-guided activities and instruction. That consideration is a major focus of this book. *The Intentional Teacher* asks which type of learning experience is likely to be most effective in which content areas, and what teachers can do to optimize learning in that mode. It also emphasizes that regardless of whether children engage in child- or adult-guided experience, teachers always play a vital educational role by creating supportive environments and using instructional strategies to advance children's thinking to the next level.

In other words, both child-guided and adult-guided experience have a place in the early childhood setting. It is not the case that one is good and the other bad, or that one is developmentally appropriate and the other not. Intentional teachers understand this and are prepared to make use of either or both in combination, choosing what works best for any given subject, situation, or child.

## **Intentional teaching terms**

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At the top of the daily message board, the teachers write the sentence: "Who is here today?" Underneath they draw a column of stick figures, and next to each figure they write the name of a child or adult in the class. Each day the teachers indicate who is absent that day by making an erasable X in front of that name. Each day they also draw stick figure(s) and write the name(s) of any guest(s) who will be visiting the classroom. If the guest is free to play with the children, they draw a toy, such as a ball or book, in the stick figure's hand. If the guest is there only to watch or observe, they draw a clipboard in the hand.

Each morning the class begins by talking about who is "present" and who is "absent." Then, together with their teachers, the children count the number of stick figures with no mark (in school) and those with a mark (not in school). They also discuss any guest(s) who are coming and whether that person will be a

## Child-guided experience + adult-guided experience = Optimal learning

An effective early childhood program combines *both* child-guided and adult-guided educational experiences. The terms “child-guided experience” and “adult-guided experience” do not refer to extremes (that is, they are not highly child-controlled or adult-controlled). Rather, adults play intentional roles in child-guided experience; and children have significant, active roles in adult-guided experience. Each takes advantage of planned or spontaneous, unexpected learning opportunities.

	<b>Child-guided experience . . .</b>	
<b>is not entirely child-controlled (with the teacher passive)</b>	<b>proceeds primarily along the lines of children’s interests and actions, with strategic teacher support</b>	<b>is not entirely adult-controlled (with the children passive)</b>

Example: Two children want to divide a bowl of beads equally between themselves.

The teacher does not get involved, even when the children become frustrated and begin to get angry at each other over who has more.	<p>The children first try to make two equal piles by eyeballing them, but they are not satisfied.</p> <p>The teacher suggests they count their beads.</p> <p>They do so, and then move beads between their piles, count again, and make adjustments until the piles are equal.</p>	The teacher counts the beads and divides by 2, telling the children how many beads each should take.
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	<b>Adult-guided experience . . .</b>	
<b>is not entirely child-controlled (with the teacher passive)</b>	<b>proceeds primarily along the lines of the teacher’s goals, but is also shaped by the children’s active engagement</b>	<b>is not entirely adult-controlled (with the children passive)</b>

Example: The teacher wants the children to learn about shadows and their properties.

The teacher allows the children to deflect the focus from shadows to a discussion of what they want for Christmas.	<p>The teacher plans the lesson and leads a small group in exploring shadows with flashlights and a sheet.</p> <p>The teacher encourages and uses the children’s input; for example, when they want to make “animal” shadows.</p>	The teacher controls all aspects of the lesson and delivers it to the whole group.
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“player” or a “watcher.” Sometimes the teachers ask the children to “predict” whether an absent child will be back the next day. For example, after informing the class that Tommy had left yesterday for a three-day vacation, a teacher asks, “Do you think he will be here tomorrow?”

These teachers are acting with intention throughout this daily activity. They take advantage of both child-guided and adult-guided experience. The children are naturally curious about the members of their classroom community, and using a daily message board helps to solidify their social awareness. The children know everyone’s name and notice when a peer is missing from their small-group table. This awareness the children come to on their own, that is, through child-guided experience. For adult-guided experience, the teachers use the children’s knowledge and interest to introduce literacy ideas and processes—writing each person’s name on the message board.

They also embed mathematical concepts and processes into using the board. There is classification (present versus absent; players versus watchers), counting (one-to-one correspondence of names and stick figures; tallying those with and without marks), and relational time concepts (yesterday, today, tomorrow). Children are asked to predict, a process used in science; later they see whether their prediction is confirmed.

Throughout the activity, adults and children engage in conversation, which enhances language development. Using adult-guided strategies, the teachers intentionally introduce new vocabulary words, such as *present* and *absent*. And the natural flow of talk, in which adults capitalize on the child-guided desire to communicate, boosts fluency.

Earlier in this chapter, I introduced the concept of “the intentional teacher” and organizing idea of “child- versus adult-guided experience” using three terms that reappear throughout the rest of the book. They are *intentional*, *teaching*, and *content*, and because they play such a key role in understanding

the chapters that follow, let me clarify now how I define them and how they fit together.

## The meaning of *intentional*

To be “intentional” is to act purposefully, with a goal in mind and a plan for accomplishing it. Intentional acts originate from careful thought and are accompanied by consideration of their potential effects. Thus an “intentional” teacher aims at clearly defined learning objectives for children, employs instructional strategies likely to help children achieve the objectives, and continually assesses progress and adjusts the strategies based on that assessment. The teacher who can explain just *why* she is doing what she is doing is acting intentionally—whether she is using a strategy tentatively for the first time or automatically from long practice, as part of an elaborate set up or spontaneously in a teachable moment.

Effective teachers are intentional with respect to many facets of the learning environment, beginning with the emotional climate they create. They deliberately select equipment and materials and put them in places where children will notice and want to use them. In planning the program day or week, intentional teachers choose which specific learning activities, contexts, and settings to use and when. And they choose when and how much time to spend on specific content areas and how to integrate them. All these teacher decisions and behaviors set the tone and substance of what happens in the classroom.

Intentionality refers especially to how teachers interact with children. Pianta defines intentionality as “directed, designed interactions between children and teachers in which teachers purposefully challenge, scaffold, and extend children’s skills” (2003, 5). Berliner (1987; 1992) emphasizes that effective teaching requires intentionality in interactions with students, with an understanding of the expected outcomes of instruction. He summarizes research on the relationship between classroom

environment and learning outcomes in a list of elements characteristic of good intentional teaching:

- ▶ **High expectations**—Teachers assume children are capable of achieving meaningful educational goals. Teachers who *expect* children to learn will deliberately engage in instructional activities to enhance children’s knowledge and skills. Teachers’ high expectations are also transmitted to children and parents, who then see themselves as active and capable participants in the learning process.
- ▶ **Planning and management**—Teachers have concrete plans to introduce subject matter and sequence children’s learning. They can manage both individual behavior and group dynamics. While guiding the class toward defined objectives, teachers remain open to pursuing related topics that arise and capture children’s interest.
- ▶ **Learning-oriented classroom**—Children, as well as teachers, value the classroom as a place where learning occurs. When adults act with the intention of teaching, children can act with the intention of learning.
- ▶ **Engaging activities**—Teachers understand how children learn and that activities and ideas connected to children’s own experience are more likely to capture their interest. They understand also that tasks pegged too far above or below children’s current capabilities can undermine children’s self-confidence in their ability to learn.
- ▶ **Thoughtful questioning**—Teachers pose questions to get insight into what children are thinking and to stimulate their thought processes. Rote questions and the thoughtless recitations they evoke, by contrast, not only fail to further children’s learning but can derail it through boredom, resentment, or discouragement.
- ▶ **Feedback**—Children naturally look to teachers for supportive and evaluative feedback, and effective teachers know when and how to provide it. Presenting information, making comments, asking questions, identifying contradictions in children’s

thinking, and posing “what if” challenges are hallmark strategies of intentionality. Unlike praise or criticism, which merely indicates “right” or “wrong” and may be interpreted as a sign of the teacher’s personal (dis)approval of the child (e.g., “I like the way you solved that problem”), evaluative feedback focuses on learning rather than judgment (“Your idea to carry the cup on a tray solved the problem of water spilling on the floor”).

## The meaning of *teaching*

Teaching is the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and especially the behaviors and skills teachers employ in their work with learners. An effective teacher is competent in three areas:

- ▶ **Curriculum**—the knowledge and skills teachers are expected to teach and children are expected to learn, and the plans for experiences through which learning will take place. Effective teachers know the subject matter covered in their program’s curriculum and how children typically develop with regard to each domain addressed. Efforts to specify what preschool children need to know and be able to do have been made by states in their standards and by specialized professional organizations such as the International Reading Association (IRA & NAEYC 1998), Council on Physical Education for Children (NASPE 2000; 2002), and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM 2000; NAEYC & NCTM 2002).
- ▶ **Pedagogy**—the ways teachers promote children’s development and learning. Effective teachers ensure that children experience a learning environment that promotes their development and learning in all areas of the curriculum. For starters, teachers establish a nurturing environment in which children are healthy and safe and feel secure. Beyond this basic responsibility, teachers respect children’s differences, are inclusive with respect to special needs, relate to families, and use instructional approaches and strategies effectively to support children’s learning and thinking. The essential elements of this component are highlighted in the

Teaching standard of NAEYC's Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (2005) and in its book *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Copple & Bredekamp 2006). A quarter of a century of research, summarized in the panel report *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* (National Research Council 2000a), establishes that how adults interact with children is a significant determinant of developmental outcomes. More than any other variable, instructional interactions define a program's quality and its impact on children's intellectual and social development (Pianta 2003).

► **Assessment**—the process of determining how children are progressing toward expected outcomes of learning and development. Effective teachers know how to administer, interpret, and apply the results of assessment as they plan learning experiences for individual children and the class as a whole, and to monitor individual and group progress. Teachers share assessment results with parents to ensure home and school work together to support children's early development. (Assessment also is increasingly used for program and teacher accountability.) Some assessments are dictated by administrators or policy makers, then administered by teachers or outside specialists; other assessments are developed by individual teachers to fit their classroom needs. Guidelines for appropriate assessment of early learning are defined in a joint position of NAEYC and NAECs/SDE (2003) and in the Assessment standard of NAEYC's Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (2005).

## The meaning of *content*

Content is the substance or subject matter that teachers teach, and therefore the object of children's learning. For the purposes of this book, *content* refers more specifically to the knowledge (certain vocabulary and concepts) and skills in an area of learning:

► **Vocabulary**—the language used in a content area. For example, reading vocabulary includes the names of the letters in the alphabet as well as words

such as *alphabet, book, author, and rhyme*. Social development vocabulary includes words for feelings (*angry, happy*) and the language used to invite someone to play or to tell someone to stop throwing blocks. Visual arts vocabulary includes descriptors for color, shape, and texture, as well as names of artists, genres, and techniques.

► **Concepts**—the important ideas or principles within a content area, its "big ideas." For example, basic reading concepts include that books are read front to back, that print on a page is read from top to bottom and left to right, and that a relationship exists between spoken and written language. In social development, basic conflict resolution concepts include that it is better to solve problems by talking than hitting, and that solutions should be fair to everyone. Visual arts concepts include "big ideas" such as realism versus abstraction, and how cultural beliefs and values are represented through art.

► **Skills**—the specific abilities needed within a domain of learning and development. In reading, skills include recognizing the component sounds in words and the letters of the alphabet from their written shapes. Conflict resolution skills include expressing feelings, listening to others, and negotiating a compromise. Examples of visual arts skills are manipulating a paintbrush to make art, and observing and comparing the work of two artists.

Of course, there are knowledge (vocabulary and concepts) and skills that cut across one or more content areas, and early childhood education strives to maximize such broad and general learning. Because this book is organized by content area, however, the challenge for the intentional teacher is presented as identifying the "what" and "how to teach it" in each content domain. But, while this book looks at content in area-specific ways, in the classroom the cumulative result of a comprehensive and integrated education should be developing children's total vocabulary, enhancing their overall conceptual understanding of the world, and expanding their full repertoire of skills.

The field of early childhood education is sometimes accused of being anti-content. If the accusation has some truth to it, it's partly carryover from a time when much of the emphasis in early education was on sharing, cooperating, and playing nicely in order to transition children from home to a group setting. It's also partly developmental appropriateness misinterpreted, typified by well-meaning teachers who insist they cannot display the alphabet because it pressures young children to memorize their ABCs.

If early education has been criticized for neglecting content, primary education is accused of going the opposite way and ignoring social and emotional development (and, in response to current academic pressures, of reducing support in other domains such as physical development and the arts). This tension prompted NAEYC and NAECS/SDE to develop a joint position on curriculum for children birth through age 8 (1991; 2003). The 1991 statement aimed to address two basic problems of the time: "the 'early childhood error' (inadequate attention to the content of the curriculum) and the 'elementary error' (overattention to curriculum objectives, with less attention to the individual child)" (Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992, 3).

Today, curriculum that meets the needs of young children is "comprehensive" (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003):

[It] encompasses critical areas of development including children's physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development; and cognition and general knowledge; and subject matter areas such as science, mathematics, language, literacy, social studies, and the arts (more fully and explicitly for older children). (2)

Each of these content areas has its own vocabulary, concepts, and skills for children to master. Because young children typically are encountering these content areas for the first time, they need their teachers to "set the foundation for later understanding and success" (NAEYC 2001, 39).

\* \* \*

If all children are to succeed, teachers need to create an effective balance between learning that's child initiated and learning that is guided by adults. (Hyson 2000, 60)

This book advocates a balanced approach, acknowledging that children learn through both child-guided and adult-guided experience and that teachers are most effective when they are able to choose among and apply any of a range of teaching approaches without going to the extremes. As shown in the box on page 3, that approach is neither laissez-faire, in which all learning is left to the child, nor entirely top-down, in which the child is seen as an empty vessel into which the teacher pours knowledge. Interactions between teacher and children are neither overly teacher-directed and didactic nor overly child-centered and left to chance. Instead, intentional teaching means systematically introducing content, in all domains, using developmentally based methods and respecting children's modes of learning.

Naturally, there will be individual differences. What some children get on their own or through interactions with peers, other children will encounter only through direct adult intervention. Therefore, the suggestions offered here cannot substitute for teachers observing and knowing the experiences and learning styles of the individual children in their classrooms.

At present, the early childhood field lacks a label for such a balance between child-centered and adult-directed approaches. "Eclectic" seems too random. "Combination" or "middle-of-the-road" are vague. In this book, I have suggested a term not original to me, but useful in this context, I believe. I suggest *intentional teaching*—because it says teachers play a thoughtful role during both child- and adult-guided experience. Whatever label we use, it is important that the words convey our commitment to child development principles as well as to educational content.

Defining and following such a balanced approach may help us to get past polarizing debates and reach more effective practice. Further, this approach will inspire us to continually update our

knowledge and reflect on our practices—that is, to be intentional teachers whose methods ensure successful outcomes for young children.

## Questions for Further Thought

1. What terms other than *intentional teaching* might describe the kind of thoughtful, multifaceted instruction advocated in this book?
2. In what contexts does *child-guided* experience seem to predominate? In what contexts does *adult-guided* experience seem to predominate? In what situations do adults themselves learn primarily through their own efforts and in what situations is their learning primarily guided by others? How can understanding adult modes of learning inform how we intentionally teach children?
3. How can the early childhood field reverse public perception that it is “anti-content”?
4. How can the early childhood field educate the public that “content” for young children should cover all areas of learning, not just literacy, mathematics, and science?
5. What strategies, in addition to writing books such as this, can the early childhood field employ to encourage the adoption of intentional teaching?