



## The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning (Rev. ed.)

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### About this book

This revised edition of *The Intentional Teacher* guides teachers to balance both child-guided and adult-guided learning experiences that respond to children's interests and focus on what they need to learn to be successful in school and life.

### About this excerpt

Chapter 1, "Introducing Intentional Teaching," introduces the concept of intentional teaching and explains the rationale for promoting children's learning of knowledge and skills through a blend of both child-guided and adult-guided experiences.

# Introducing Intentional Teaching

During choice time, Brandon, age 5, stands at the sink, soaking a sponge in water and squeezing it out. His teacher, Sam, kneels beside Brandon and imitates his actions.

"It's really heavy!" says Brandon after resoaking his sponge.

"I wonder what makes it so heavy," muses Sam.

"I think it's the water," answers Brandon.

"How can you tell?" asks Sam.

Brandon thinks for a moment, then squeezes out his sponge. "Hey! It's lighter now!" he says. "The water! The water makes it heavy!" Brandon fills and squeezes out his sponge again, as if to make sure. "Now you make yours lighter," he tells Sam.

"How?"

"Squeeze out the water."

Sam does so and hands the sponge to Brandon, who weighs one sponge in each hand. "There you go," he says to Sam. "Now your sponge is light like mine."

Sam then turns to Joon, age 4, and holds out two sponges. When Joon takes one of them, Sam pours water on to soak it. He puts the lighter, drier sponge in Joon's other hand and gestures to show that the wet sponge is heavier. Joon has watched his friend Brandon, so now he squeezes the wet sponge and weighs both sponges in his hands to feel the difference, smiling with his newfound understanding.

This book is about how an *intentional teacher*, like the one in this opening vignette and those that follow, 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 unplanned situation arises (as it always does), they can recognize a teaching opportunity and take advantage of it, too.

Intentional teaching means teachers act with specific outcomes or goals in mind for all domains of children's development and learning. "Academic" domains (literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies) as well as what have traditionally been considered early learning domains (social and emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative development) all consist of important knowledge and skills that young children want and need to master. Intentional teachers, therefore, integrate and promote meaningful learning in *all* domains. On the next page are additional examples of intentional teaching.

Katie, almost 5 years old, draws a picture of a garden with many different plants and asks her teacher, Sara, to write down the story that she will tell her about it. Katie hands Sara a small index card and a pencil and dictates, "This is a picture about my mommy's garden." Sara writes down exactly what Katie says.

"Now," says Katie, "I'm going to tell you the names of all the flowers and vegetables in my picture."

Sara points to the index card and asks Katie, "Do you think they will all fit?"

"Yes," says Katie, who begins to enumerate them as her teacher carefully writes down each one. As she nears the bottom of the card, Sara again asks Katie if she thinks all the names will fit. Katie reconsiders. "I think I need more room." She takes the card and turns it over.

"Should I continue writing on the back?" asks Sara.

"But then my mommy won't see it," worries Katie.

"Mmm, I wonder what else you could do so your mommy can see your whole story."

Katie thinks again, then gets another index card and tapes it to the bottom of the first one. "Will that be enough?" asks Sara. "There are still lots of plants left to name in your picture."

Katie tapes one more card on the bottom, and sets two more on the table "just in case." Katie continues to name the flowers and vegetables, and Sara writes down each one.



At small group time, the children in a 4s classroom make patterns with squares of colored construction paper. Hakim makes a complex pattern of red-blue-yellow-yellow, red-blue-yellow-yellow, red-blue-yellow-yellow. "Make one like mine," he tells his teacher, Maria. All the children stop to watch. Maria copies Hakim's pattern but on the third repeat she deliberately sets out pieces of red, blue, yellow, and then blue paper and waits for the children to notice. When no one comments, Maria says, "This doesn't look right. Can you help me?" The children offer different solutions until Hakim replaces the last blue square with a yellow one. "That's right!" the children chorus. "Now you make one for me to copy," Hakim says.

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 children learn and the specific content they are learning. At some times or for some content, children seem to learn best from *child-guided experience*—that is, they acquire knowledge and skills mainly through their own exploration and experience, including through interactions with peers. At other times and for other content, children learn best from *adult-guided experience*—that is, in planned situations in which their teachers introduce information, model skills, and the like. (See the box on p. 4.)

The division between child-guided learning and adult-guided learning is not a rigid one. Rarely does learning come about entirely through a child's efforts or only from adult instruction. Further, 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).

### Child-Guided Experience + Adult-Guided Experience = Optimal Learning

An effective early childhood program combines both child-guided and adult-guided educational experiences. These terms do not refer to extremes—that is, child-guided experiences are not highly child controlled, nor are adult-guided experiences highly adult controlled. Rather, adults play intentional roles in child-guided experiences, and children have significant, active roles in adult-guided experiences. Each type of experience takes advantage of planned as well as spontaneous, unexpected learning opportunities.

A child-guided experience . . .		
is <b>not</b> entirely child controlled (with the teacher passive)	proceeds primarily along the lines of children’s interests and actions, with strategic teacher support	is <b>not</b> entirely adult controlled (with the children passive)
<b>Example:</b> Two children want to divide a bowl of beads equally between themselves.		
<b>Child controlled:</b> The teacher does not get involved, even when the children become frustrated and begin to get angry at each other over who has more.	<b>Child guided:</b> The children first try to make two equal piles by eyeballing them, but they are not satisfied. The teacher suggests they count their beads. They do so, and then move beads between their piles, count again, and make adjustments until the piles are equal.	<b>Adult controlled:</b> The teacher counts the beads and divides by two, telling the children how many beads each should take.
An adult-guided experience . . .		
is <b>not</b> entirely child controlled (with the teacher passive)	proceeds primarily along the lines of the teacher’s goals, but is also shaped by the children’s active engagement	is <b>not</b> entirely adult controlled (with the children passive)
<b>Example:</b> The teacher wants the children to learn about shadows and their properties.		
<b>Child controlled:</b> The teacher allows the children to deflect the focus from shadows to a discussion of what toys they like to play with in the sandbox.	<b>Adult guided:</b> The teacher plans the lesson and leads a small group in exploring shadows with flashlights and a sheet. The teacher encourages and uses the children’s input—for example, when they want to make animal shadows.	<b>Adult controlled:</b> The teacher controls all aspects of the lesson and delivers it to the whole group.

However, they also learn syntax and vocabulary from the adults around them, and teachers often make a point of introducing new words and more complex sentence structures (adult-guided experience). 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 ways.

Similarly, the division of content into the knowledge and skills that seem to be best acquired primarily through child-guided experience versus those acquired primarily through adult-guided experience is not an exact process. For example,

most children acquire basic language abilities largely through child-guided learning experiences (albeit with linguistic input from the adults around them); they 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 through adult-guided experiences. In other content areas, however, the division is not so clear. Yet even in cases where assignment to “primarily child guided” or “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.

Although these divisions are imprecise, they are still useful when teachers are considering 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* explores which type of learning experience is likely to be most effective for 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 help advance children’s thinking to the next level.

In other words, both child-guided and adult-guided experiences 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

At the top of the class’s daily message board, the preschool teachers write this sentence: “Who is here today?” Underneath it, 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 block, in the stick figure’s hand. If the guest is there only to 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 (those in school) and those with a mark (those not in school). They also discuss any guest who is coming and whether that person will be a “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?”

Later in the year, as the children’s literacy skills begin to emerge, the teachers replace the stick figures with the children’s names. Some children

### Dual Language Learners

The term *dual language learners* refers to children who have a language at home that is other than English.

write their initial letters or their full names themselves. Children who are present make a mark (such as a dot, check, or plus sign) next to their names. Together with their teachers, they count how many names have a mark and how many are unmarked to determine how many are in school and how many are absent. One day, when Jose's mother will be coming to show the class how to make tamales, he tells a teacher, "Escriba a 'mi madre.'" "You want me to write that your mother is coming," she says, and draws a stick figure of a woman with a spoon in her hand. Jose nods. "Mi madre!" he repeats, and smiles.

These teachers are acting with intention throughout this daily activity. They take advantage of both child-guided and adult-guided experiences. 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. The children come to this awareness 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, encouraging those who are able to write themselves, and helping children who are dual language learners make connections between their home language and English.

They also embed mathematical concepts and processes into the activity. The children use 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 will discover whether or not 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 the organizing idea of child- versus adult-guided experience using three terms that reappear throughout the book: *intentional*, *teaching*, and *content*. 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 *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, and whether it is used as part of a deliberate plan 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 inviting equipment and materials that reflect children’s individual interests, skills, needs, cultures, and home languages, and they put these 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 to address specific content areas, how much time to spend on them, 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 children, 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**—When teachers *expect* children to learn, they do.
- **Planning and management**—While guiding the class toward defined and sequenced learning objectives, teachers remain open to children’s related interests.
- **Learning-oriented classroom**—Children, as well as teachers, value the classroom as a place to learn.
- **Engaging activities**—Teachers connect activities to children’s experiences and developmental levels.
- **Thoughtful questioning**—Teachers pose questions to get insight into children’s thought processes and stimulate children’s thinking.
- **Feedback**—Effective evaluative feedback focuses on children’s learning rather than merely offering praise or disapproval.

### Thoughtful Questioning for Dual Language Learners

To help dual language learners express their understanding, use questioning facial expressions and body language along with a few key words that you have learned—such as “Why did that happen?”—in each child’s home language. If you do not understand a child’s response, record it and ask a parent or other staff member to translate later.

## 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 re-

gard 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 early learning standards and by specialized professional organizations such as the International Reading Association (IRA; 2005; IRA & NAEYC 1998), National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE; 2009a), Head Start (US Department of Health and Human Services 2013), World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA; 2014), and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM; 2000; NAEYC & NCTM 2010). Standards for kindergarten, including the Common Core State Standards (now adopted by the majority of states) and the Next Generation Science Standards, may also affect future standards developed or revised for prekindergarten programs (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers 2010; Next Generation Science Standards 2013).

- **Pedagogy**—the ways teachers promote children’s development and learning. Effective teachers ensure that children experience a learning environment that promotes their development in all areas of the curriculum. To begin, teachers establish a nurturing environment in which children are healthy and safe and feel secure. Beyond this basic responsibility, teachers respect differences in children’s preferences, cultures, home languages, and so on; are inclusive with respect to special needs; partner with families; and use instructional approaches and strategies effectively to support children’s learning and thinking. The essential elements of pedagogy are highlighted in the standards for teaching and for teachers in *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria: The Mark of Quality in Early Childhood Education* (NAEYC 2007) and in the *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice* books for teachers of children ages 3 to 6 and teachers of kindergartners (Copple & Bredekamp 2006; Phillips & Scrinzi 2013, respectively). 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 for children. More than any other variable, instructional interactions define a program’s quality and its impact on children’s intellectual and social development (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson 2011; Pianta 2003).
- **Assessment**—the ongoing process of determining how children are progressing toward expected outcomes of learning and development, using multiple sources of information. Assessment can take many forms, from observational measures and portfolios of children’s work to standardized tests and instruments. Effective teachers know how to collect, 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, and then the information is collected by teachers or outside specialists; other assessments are developed by individual teachers to fit their classroom needs. Guidelines for the appropriate assessment of early learning are defined in a joint position statement of NAEYC and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003) and in the assessment of child progress standard of *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria* (2007).

## The Meaning of Content

**Content** is the substance or subject matter that teachers teach and is, 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, vocabulary in the area of language and literacy includes the names of the letters in the alphabet as well as words such as *alphabet*, *book*, *author*, and *rhyme*. Social and emotional development vocabulary includes words for feelings (*angry*, *happy*) and the language used to invite someone to play or to ask 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 language and literacy concepts include that a relationship exists between spoken and written language, that in English books are read from front to back, and that in English print on a page is read from top to bottom and left to right. In social and emotional 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 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 language and literacy, reading skills include recognizing the component sounds in words and the letters of the alphabet from their written shapes. In the area of social and emotional development, 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 to identify 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 has been sometimes accused of being anti-content. If the accusation has some truth to it, it's partly because of carryover from a time when much of the emphasis in early education was on sharing, cooperating, and playing nicely to help children as they transitioned from the home to a group setting. It's also partly developmental appropriateness misinterpreted, typified by well-meaning teachers who feel they cannot display the alphabet because it pressures young children to memorize letters.

If early childhood education has been criticized for neglecting content, primary-grade education has been accused of going the opposite way and ignoring children's 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 the NAECS/SDE to develop a joint position statement on curriculum for young children through age 8 (NAEYC & NAECS-SDE 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).

A 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, 19).



"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 experiences 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 extreme of either type of experience. 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.

### Content and Dual Language Learners

Make content easier and more meaningful for dual language learners by using their home languages where possible and by using nonverbal cues, gestures, and visuals to help them understand what you are saying in English.

Naturally, there will be individual differences in how children learn most effectively. What some children discover on their own or through interactions with peers, other children will encounter only through direct adult intervention. Therefore, the suggestions offered in this book cannot substitute for teachers' observing and knowing the experiences and learning styles of the individual children in their programs.

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* and *middle-of-the-road* are vague. In this book, I have suggested a term that is not original to me but one that is useful in this context, I believe. I suggest *intentional teaching*—because it indicates that teachers play a thoughtful role during both child- and adult-guided learning. 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 arrive at 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.

## For Further Consideration

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 a common perception that it is anti-content?
4. How can the early childhood field demonstrate to the public that content for young children should cover all areas of learning, not just literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies?
5. How can intentional teaching help to support *all* young learners, including children who are dual language learners and those with special needs?
6. What strategies, in addition to writing books such as this, can the early childhood field employ to encourage the adoption of intentional teaching?
7. What can you as a beginning or experienced teacher do to guarantee that intentionality has a place in your daily interactions with children?