Increasing numbers of young children with diagnosed disabilities and unique learning needs are enrolled in early childhood programs. Individualizing learning opportunities is one widely accepted practice for successful inclusion.

Individualizing Instruction in Preschool Classrooms

Mary B. Boat, Laurie A. Dinnebeil, and Youlmi Bae

In 2003, 34% of young children with disabilities received special education services in community-based early childhood programs such as child care centers, Head Start classrooms, and nursery schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These services are provided by early childhood special educators.

However, these special education professionals usually spend just a few hours each week with the children. If early childhood inclusion is to be a successful educational approach, it is imperative that ALL early childhood teachers understand and are able to provide individualized instruction to young children with special needs. This article describes teaching techniques that preschool teachers can use to support the learning needs of all children with whom they work, including young children with disabilities and special needs.

The term *instruction* refers to the methods used to teach a curriculum (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). In early childhood education, instruction encompasses many different types of learning experiences ranging from non-directive to directive (Wolery, 2005; Wolery & Wilbers, 1994).

Just as children's learning falls along a continuum from passive to active, so does the process of instruction. Instruction may be as basic as modeling how to put on a coat, or it can be as complex as helping children learn to read. The degree to which teacher direction or guidance is used depends on the objective of the experience and the children's individual needs. Thus, for teaching to be *instruction*, it must be intentional. The result of appropriately individualized instruction is meaningful learning for all young children.

> **What is *instruction*?**
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> ***Instruction*** refers to intentional teaching methods. When is something teachers do or say considered to be *instruction*? When a teacher draws a young child in to a conversation about a picture or experience, is that teacher providing instruction? Perhaps it is, if the teacher is creating an opportunity for the child to express herself verbally or practice turn-taking skills. Teaching is instructive if it is done *intentionally* to provide support or opportunities for children's learning.
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> Teachers who are aware of children's learning needs continuously look for ways to support their learning.

How to Individualize Instruction

The process of individualizing instruction consists of four primary steps (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004):

- **Get to know each child's** interests, needs, and abilities
- **Create opportunities for learning** that build on children's interests

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- **Scaffold children's learning** through supportive interactions
- **Monitor children's progress** toward achieving important goals

These components are interrelated and form the framework for decision making around individualization.

To successfully create engaging learning opportunities for children, teachers must know
- what children enjoy and value,
- what children are capable of doing, and
- what adults can and should expect from each child (skills as well as appropriate content standards)

Teachers who know about the children can then create learning opportunities based on that information and support their learning through instructional strategies that promote growth.

Skilled teachers determine whether children are making appropriate progress toward achieving goals by monitoring progress (assessment) *and* using that information to change instructional strategies and intensity as appropriate.

Get to Know Each Child

Most children are naturally curious about their surroundings and eagerly participate in learning activities. For some children, however, it is difficult to identify what motivates them to be more fully engaged. Teachers who pay attention to what children do and say can usually find out what motivates them. This is true for all children, but even more so for children with disabilities because they may not exhibit the same kinds of behaviors as their typically developing peers.

Teachers who successfully work with children who have special needs are diligent in identifying child interests by collaborating with families and other service providers who know the child. This knowledge, coupled with teaching skills, is essential to determine how to use individual information about children to work toward desired outcomes for them.

For example, identifying familiar, common objects is a skill mastered by most preschool children and is a goal on many individualized education plans (IEPs). Some young children, however, have little interest in typical objects in early childhood classrooms. This does not mean that these children are not interested in objects, but rather that their interests fall outside the spectrum of items that appeal to most young children.

Teachers certainly want to encourage young children to be able to identify and name common objects. This skill is necessary for language and literacy development, and provides a common frame of reference for interactions with peers. Teachers who know children well can identify what is likely to motivate them to develop an interest in everyday early childhood learning materials.

Create Opportunities for Learning

The ability to generate and sustain children's interest in learning is a

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Table 1: Teaching Strategies That Pique Children's Interest
1. **Comment** about an event that appears to interest the child. This technique prompts the child to repeat, respond to, or expand on the comment. A teacher looking at a child's painting might say, "Look at all of the bright colors you used! I see pink, green, and purple."
2. **Expand** on a child's statement. Elaborate with one or two key words that are likely to build the child's expressive vocabulary. A child may say, "I have truck," and the teacher may elaborate by saying, "Yes, you have a red fire truck."
3. Introduce an **unexpected event**. Set up situations that capture a child's attention through novelty and create cognitive dissonance. A teacher might do something that is inconsistent with the daily routine or the way children typically perceive their environment. For example, hold a child's name card upside down or start to dress a doll by putting a shoe on its hand.
4. Initially provide **inadequate portions or insufficient materials.** Without sufficient quantity to complete a task, the child is likely to ask for more. If only a small ball of modeling compound is available, the child may ask for more to roll out and use a cookie cutter to make shapes.
5. **Block access.** When a teacher subtly denies a child access to a preferred object or event, the child is likely to request the object or ask for assistance. The teacher might set out bright balls in a plastic container with a tight lid. A child who is interested in playing with the balls will request help to open the container.
6. Create **opportunities to choose**. When children are given choices among objects, events, or activities, they are more likely to actively participate. Choices provide children with opportunities to develop expressive language and cognitive skills. Some choices may be routine, such as offering either crackers or cereal at snack time. Other choices capitalize on children's interests by building on their activities: "Would you like the letter you wrote to go in the mailbox? Or do you want to take it home with you?"
7. Make a **direct request** to say or do something that requires more than a yes or no answer. For example, insist that a child state the name of an object before it is available for play: "Please say 'ball' if you want the orange ball."

critical skill for effective early childhood teachers. Teachers who can pique children's curiosity and then use appropriate instructional strategies to convey information and skills provide children with rich learning environments (Sandall & Schwartz, 2008).

Maya, a 4-year-old, was diagnosed with a language delay. Maya's teacher, Mr. Flores, is working with her on using words for common objects and activities in the classroom rather than gestures such as pointing or grabbing objects. Mr. Flores seeks a way to motivate Maya's use of vocabulary. He carefully observes what interests Maya and uses this information to set up learning opportunities.

Mr. Flores notes that Maya enjoys working in the art center and especially painting and cutting paper. To provide her with an opportunity to practice using words for common objects, he places crayons and scissors just out her reach, creating a situation in which Maya must ask for the items. He does not hand the objects to her until she names or attempts to name them.

Mr. Flores may further support Maya's learning by modeling the correct words and asking Maya to repeat them. She is then rewarded by receiving the objects she desires.

This scenario may be repeated, but should be utilized only to help Maya use her vocabulary to obtain what she desires or get her needs met. Mr. Flores actively reinforces Maya's independent attempts to use her vocabulary, because independence is the ultimate goal.

The strategy described here works well for Maya, but effective teachers know that it will not work for every child. Thus, it is imperative that teachers know individual children's interests, cultures, and values before determining the best way to create learning opportunities (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). For example, a Native American child whose family culture teaches that it is not polite to ask for objects may not respond to the strategy that worked for Maya.

Early childhood teachers use a variety of strategies to facilitate learning opportunities for children. The seven techniques in Table 1 vary in level of teacher direction as well as in the degree to which a child must respond (Ostrosky & Kaiser, 1991). The first several strategies do not require a child's response for an activity to continue. The later strategies are much more directive.

When creating opportunities for learning, make sure that children are ultimately in control of the situation. Even though the intent is to entice a child into the interaction, the child may or may not respond. Teachers try

to create opportunities that interest and engage children in learning, but there is no way to make them be interested.

All of the strategies mentioned here are effective ways to engage all children, not just those who have disabilities. Instructional strategies are intended to provide the minimal assistance necessary for the child to successfully attempt the skill (Wolery, 2005; Wolery, Ault, & Doyle, 1992). When using these strategies, do not single out children or foster their dependence. Drawing attention to differences in how children are supported may decrease the likelihood the target children will participate in the opportunity. When planning an intervention, always ask if the strategy is appropriate for the individual child, necessary, and sufficient to promote success.

Scaffold to Support Learning

When teachers support learning, the key is to determine what type and intensity of support will be most helpful to individual children. A teacher's simple glance may draw one child's attention to an inappropriate behavior. Another child may need a verbal reminder. Yet another may benefit from specific guidelines or examples of positive behavior. One child may follow when the teacher demonstrates how to properly hold scissors to cut paper, while another may need hand-over-hand support for the same activity.

In all likelihood, children only need support temporarily, so savvy teachers know that fading their support is critical to children's independence. Effective teachers

Table 2: Match Support to Children's Needs		
Support	**Child Needs**	**Examples of Teaching Strategies**
Time	Time to process information and to act on a request.	Ask a child to begin cleaning up. Provide plenty of wait time after the request to see if the child complies before making a further intervention. Ask a child to share something he enjoyed about a field trip. Provide enough wait time for the child to reflect and respond.
Gesture	A reminder to perform a skill.	Point to the trash can as child gets up from snack and leaves her milk carton. Make a "shh" sign to remind children to be quiet during a story.
Verbal Prompt	More explicit information to successfully perform a skill.	Verbally remind a child to put away the toys she used in one center before moving to another. Verbally remind a child to put on a smock before waterplay.
Model or Demonstration	How to do a challenging skill or help remembering how to perform a skill.	Demonstrate how to put on a glove. Show how to spread fingers and pull on the glove one finger at a time. Suggest that a child watch how a peer holds a pitcher to pour a beverage.
Physical Prompt	When acquiring a skill, child needs physical guidance to be successful.	Use a hand-over-hand technique to help a child figure out how to balance table blocks. Physically help a child grasp and hold a coat zipper.

know how to individualize support to be just the right amount of help. What criteria facilitate this decision-making? Beyond knowing children's individual interests and preferences, there are indicators that may help teachers think about individual situations. Table 2 provides examples of how support from teachers or families may be matched to children's needs.

Scaffolding Strategies

Response-prompting strategies (Wolery, 2005; Wolery, et al., 1992) is a phrase used to describe the process of providing help (or prompts) in order for the learner to make a desired response. Levels of prompting can be ordered from most-to-least or least-to-most.

- **A most-to-least strategy** can be implemented if the child is

learning a complex motor skill such as dressing. At first, adults provide children with a great deal of help and gradually reduce the amount of assistance as the child acquires the skill.

- **Least-to-most prompting** can be used when the child knows how to do something, but must be supported to use the skill. For example, children often need help to generalize the skill of turn taking to new situations. While they might be proficient at taking turns when playing Peek-a-Boo with an adult, they might not be comfortable taking turns when they play with a stacking toy. The teacher provides the least amount of help necessary for the child to successfully take turns, providing more help as needed in order for the child to be successful.

The amount of help provided is planned and structured to match the child's skill level and desired outcome.

Peer-mediated strategies are another type of technique that can be used to support individual child learning (DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002; Kohler & Strain, 1999; Robertson, Green, Alpers, Schloss, & Kohler, 2003). These strategies are implemented when a more accomplished peer is paired with one who needs to develop or hone skills.

Peer mediation often occurs naturally in preschool settings. Children typically observe and interact with others in ways that scaffold development. An important aspect of designing curriculum and the learning environment is to make sure that young children have ample opportunities to interact with and learn from one another.

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Formal peer-mediated strategies go a step further, when a teacher intentionally pairs children. A teacher typically identifies a peer who possesses a desired (target) skill and works with that child to show him or her how to support a child who has yet to develop the skill.

- First, the teacher coaches the more accomplished peer on how to interact with the target child in a supportive manner, typically through role playing.
- The teacher then structures situations in which the peer "mentor" and the child developing the skill can play or work together utilizing the target skill.

For example, Matthew may have difficulty entering peer group play situations. He often resorts to disrupting the group or aggressive behavior when his attempts to join are rebuffed. The teacher may coach Tarin, a socially-skilled child who is frequently a part of the group Matthew tries to join, to prompt Matthew to use appropriate words to request participation or materials. The teacher role-plays (practices) with Tarin the specific prompts he might use. In turn, Matthew is prompted to use more appropriate interaction strategies. The teacher provides Tarin with statements he can use with Matthew to positively reinforce his use of the target skill(s).

> **Pay attention to what children do and say.**

Just as learners have choices about whether or not to engage in an instructional interaction, more accomplished peers must also be given choices about their involvement as mentors with other children.

Monitor Children's Progress

Effectively individualizing instruction is a cycle that involves knowing individual children, knowing effective instructional strategies, and determining whether or not the choices made resulted in child learning. The final step in this cycle of individualized instruction—monitoring and documenting children's progress—is just as important as knowing the best strategy to use (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004).

Without this step, the capacity of teachers to meaningfully affect children's learning is minimized and time is wasted. Determining whether or not instruction is effective must be an evidence-based process in which children's learning is documented. To accomplish this:

- First give a strategy time to work—most meaningful learning does not occur overnight.
- Then, determine the best way to collect and use evidence of children's learning.

Identify the target skill or behavior in order to keep track of children's developmental or academic progress. Choose a method of recording observations that can be incorporated into daily routines and activities.

Focused observation helps teachers plan and implement meaningful curriculum and teaching strategies. Table 3 outlines some ways to

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Table 3: Observation Techniques to Document Children's Learning

1. **Observe and record children's behavior at specific times of the day or week.** Choose a time during which the target child is likely to use a skill or behavior AND when enough adults are present.
2. **Make quick checks throughout the day.** If the skill or behavior is something that occurs fairly often, a relatively easy way to monitor progress is to pick a standard time (perhaps every hour) and record whether or not the behavior occurred at that time. While this does not yield detailed information, it indicates how often the behavior occurred.
3. **Use found objects to help keep track.** Use objects (in multiple pockets of an apron, for example) to help keep track of children's behavior. Claire is trying to keep track of how often Shoshanna initiates an interaction with a peer during 90-minute center time. Every time she sees Shoshanna initiate an interaction, she moves a small block (or other object) from one pocket to another. At the end of the day, she counts the number of blocks and records the number of initiations observed.
4. **Record the level of help a child requires.** For some children who have disabilities or special needs, it takes a long time to achieve a goal. Break down a task into smaller steps and document those steps to check for progress. Or track the amount of help a child needs to be successful. With Shoshanna, at first she might need very direct verbal prompts to approach another child (Claire asks Shoshanna to say, "Ashley will you play with me?"). After a while though, the teacher might just have to say "Shoshanna, what do you want Ashley to do?" in order to help Shoshanna approach Ashley. Finally, Claire might just need to gesture (point a finger at Ashley) in order to help Shoshanna know what to do. While Shoshanna still is not initiating interactions independently, she is certainly learning and making important progress toward that goal.

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document observations that can fit into a busy classroom schedule.

Make Sound Decisions Based on Data

The information that teachers collect as they observe and document children's learning is critically important to inform curricular decisions. Understanding when to introduce new content or increase support for a difficult skill depends on using the information collected as part of the observation process. Teachers must analyze and use the data they gather to determine if their teaching strategies are effective and make changes when the data suggests that they are not (Luze & Peterson, 2004).

The Role of IEPs

Individualization is the foundation of IEP development. IEP annual goals and objectives or benchmarks are target skills for the child to reach. While the annual goals provide a framework for a minimum level of accountability for individual children, they do not reflect the total of what children with disabilities learn in a given year, nor are they the curriculum.

IEP annual goals provide outcomes and direction that help young children access the general curriculum and developmentally typical environments. Although IEPs may include information that supports identifying appropriate instructional strategies, often it is up to the classroom teacher to determine the best way to help a child achieve his or her goals.

> **Appropriately individualized instruction leads to meaningful learning.**

Fortunately, all of the strategies discussed here can help teachers implement instructional strategies that support the diverse learning needs of all children in a classroom. Effective teachers understand that, although IEPs may specify annual goals, these goals will be achieved when the skills to be learned are embedded in the classroom routine with strategies that facilitate children's development.

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Individualizing instruction enables skilled teachers to provide meaningful learning experiences to all young children, including those with special needs (McWilliam, Wolery, & Odom, 2001). In order to provide effective instruction, teachers must

- be knowledgeable about the learners, including their abilities, interests, and needs
- create learning opportunities that are embedded in daily routines, activities, or experiences that capture children's interest and draw them into an instructional interaction

- implement a planned and structured approach for curriculum content
- make thoughtful decisions about the right kind and amount of support for children to be successful
- monitor the success of instruction to make sound decisions to support children's learning and development

Teaching is a reflective and intentional process. When scaffolding children's learning, teachers can choose from a variety of tools in their instructional toolbox!

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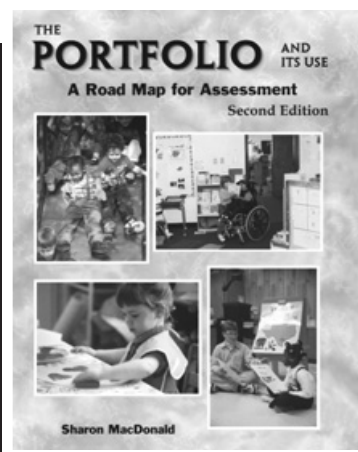
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The Southern Early Childhood Association could and should be The Voice for the children and families of the South during the 2010 decade. SECA members are caring and knowledgeable. We are hard working. By collaborating and working together, SECA members can make a difference in the lives of Southern children and early childhood professionals. We can build and maintain quality programs. We can develop and provide good-quality professional development for early childhood professionals. SECA members can be the leaders the South needs.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve. I look forward to working for SECA, its members, and for children and families in the South. I look forward to working with you, the SECA members, to see all the things SECA can achieve.