

Why Plan Based on an Inquiry Model?

An effective curriculum for young children emphasizes thinking through inquiry and exploration. It includes planned and intentional guidance and instruction from a caring and supportive educator.⁹

Many educators over the years, have used the idea of integration, and developed learning themes or units. Websites and educator resources are full of examples for craft activities, word games, experiments etc. Often these are educator chosen and directed. They are focused on a series of activities that all children complete. Such activities often have little connection to curriculum expectations or higher order thinking, and do not differentiate the learning for children. When effective planning incorporates what is known about the particular children in the class, these ‘packaged’ reused themes cannot meet the needs of this group of children.

Educator Reflection: I often feel trapped by my themes. I pick my books based on the themes, and they are not always the best books for children of this age or stage of development. During my Apple theme, all of the children have to make a booklet about apples. Some of the children find this task very easy and rush through it, other children are not interested and I have to convince them, and some of the children find it too hard. I am wondering how I can rethink my plans so they are differentiated and meet more of the children’s needs.

Resources focused on planning for young children clearly states that children begin to ask questions that lead to exploration and investigation, communication of ideas, and questions while they are experimenting and investigating.¹⁰ It is these questions, ideas, investigations, and this meaningful integration that can lead to inquiry-based units of discovery and learning. These opportunities provide for natural, genuine, and integrated learning. These experiences are authentic and are more likely to engage the



children in deep thinking. When planning, it is important to keep in mind the background experiences of the children and the context for knowing about the world in which they live. It is within real-life, hands-on contexts that the child is able to make connections and develop understanding.

Educators need to plan towards the overarching ideas in the Overall Expectations and to bring teaching in-line with an inquiry-based model:

- To ensure that curiosity, wonder, inquiry, uniqueness, and individual needs are intentionally included in planning.

*Educators should use inquiry-based learning to build on children's spontaneous desire for exploration and to gradually guide them to become more focused and systematic in their observations and investigations.*¹¹

- To plan with the end in mind based on current evidence-based practices.
*"Inquiry skills should not be taught in isolation, but integrated into interesting topics and ideas and in the children's ongoing play..."*¹²

In choosing topics for investigation, educators should consider:

- What are children curious about and what interests them? In particular, what interests this group of children?
- What do they wonder about?
- What are naturally occurring events within the year that are of interest to young children?
- What is within the child's world that can be a topic for investigation and can be explored directly?



Planning in this way is based on the following:

- Subjects which children can explore deeply and directly, (e.g., observing squirrels in their habitat instead of studying penguins which may only be observed by Canadian children in captivity, learning about the environment of the schoolyard before studying the rainforests of South America, the properties of water instead of “under the sea”). In other words, children can gather information in a concrete way rather than in an abstract way.
- Developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate contexts, (e.g., studying the changes that occur in the fall, such as the changes to the schoolyard tree in October, instead of a monthly unit on Halloween which may not be culturally appropriate or familiar to all children).
- The ideas and interests of the children. For example, exploring children’s theories about what happens when snow is brought inside, instead of a "Winter Wonderland Theme". The first idea prompts exploration and discovery, the second leads to a series of activities.

Planning based on Big Ideas

The following charts are included to assist educators in moving from theme-based to inquiry-based planning. The following provides an excerpt from a planning model based on the Big Ideas. Educators are encouraged to use this model as a way of approaching planning.

The chart outlines the following:

Column 1: Overall Expectations – This column lists an example of overall expectations from each program area. **Note:** In some cases there are overall and specific expectations grouped together from one program area.

Column 2: Assessment Tools and Strategies – This column outlines the assessment tools that are the starting points for instruction. It is the assessment information that determines the focus for teaching; the knowledge, and skills emphasized; the need for grouping children with specific needs; and how to support, extend, and differentiate the learning.

Column 3: Big Ideas – This column represents the overarching concept, knowledge, and skills. This column **is intended to replace the topics or traditional themes previously planned in Kindergarten.**

Overall Expectations	Assessment Tools and Strategies	Big Ideas	Essential Questions	Focus for Learning Possibilities