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Critique of the OWL Curriculum

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CRITIQUE OF THE OWL CURRICULUM

The following article was a joint effort by early childhood professionals and graduate students Judi Guisti, Kathryn Hinkle, Gretchen Oldenburg, Heidi Paul, Jessica Vlasie, Beth Lincoln, and Cindy Moulton with support from Dr. Julie Bullard, their professor. This study reviewed all relevant research and conducted an in-depth review of the Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum. Each team member independently conducted an investigation and provided justification for each rating based on a rubric provided by Dr. Julie Bullard for an in-depth analysis that examined whether the curriculum reflected constructivist philosophy and whether it was developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, and evidence-based. The individuals then met in two teams to review and discuss their findings. Finally, each team met to share their research, ratings, and findings and to develop the final ratings.

An overview

Opening the World of Learning (OWL) is a comprehensive Prek curriculum, with a 2005 and a 2014 edition. The curriculum was developed by David Dickinson, Juanita Copley, Elana Izquierdo, Judith Lederman, Judith Schickedanz, and Lee Wright and is published by Pearson. A comprehensive kit costs \$3,100 per classroom with an optional manipulatives kit costing an additional \$398. The OWL curriculum contains eight thematic units: 1) Welcome New Friends; 2) My Family; 3) Our Community; 4) Life on a Farm; 5) From Jungle to Desert; 6) Earth and Sky; 7) Shadows and Reflections; and 8) Make it Move. Each unit has a clearly worded “Big Question” that comprehensively focuses the learning. The “Big Question” is then broken down into four more specific questions that are presented each week. The OWL curriculum is designed to focus on literacy and math development with a smaller focus in other content areas. There are daily opportunities for children to develop concepts and skills in most of the following areas: mathematics, literacy, social studies, gross motor and fine motor development. Some of the disciplines: science, aesthetic expression, health, and self-help skills are not developed daily but are offered at least weekly. Each part of the academic day has highlighted learning goals. For example, at ABC Fun the learning goals are alphabet knowledge and self-regulation. OWL (2014) provides many opportunities throughout the day’s schedule for children to learn and practice social,

collaboration and conflict resolution skills. This is done through teacher-directed activities like morning meeting, small groups, literacy, story time and social studies, and in child-directed activities at centers and outside time.



Suggested schedules and learning formats

The suggested schedules for both the OWL half-day and full-day programs stress a predictable, consistent schedule that allows children to know what is coming next. There is a balance between active times and quiet times. The schedule suggests a balance between time spent indoors and time spent outdoors. There are times allotted for both small and whole group activities.

The curriculum model suggests teachers use a variety of learning formats such as teacher-directed and child-lead activities, small and large groups, and learning centers. The *Planning and Assessment: Teacher's Guide with Professional Development Handbook* (2014) states, "The model also provides information about the use of strategies such as: Modeling, Demonstrating, and "I Say, We Say, You Say" (p. 25). The curriculum provides the same activities for all children but gives examples of tiered instruction, "Make It Easier, Make It Harder, and English Language Learners (ELL)" (p. 28).

Does the curriculum promote constructivist beliefs?

The design of the curriculum does not offer children many opportunities to construct their own understanding or to participate in inquiry-based learning. Instead, the overall structure of the curriculum relies heavily on teacher directed activities and lessons.

"Constructivists believe that children are not just empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, but instead that children actively construct their knowledge through their interactions with

materials and others” (Bullard, 2014, p. 71). The OWL 2014 curriculum provides teacher-directed lessons for literacy in addition to morning meeting, small groups, math, science and social studies, and an “Extend Your Day” circle, in which “heads are filled” in a non-constructivist fashion. These lessons are scripted and need to be followed with fidelity, as the OWL representative explained, “Any early education product, core basil K-12, and intervention products have to be implemented with fidelity or the needed results, the outcomes for the best results on behalf of the children will not be optimal” (J. Engelbert, personal communication, March 11, 2016). Two center times are suggested for a full-day program in which children can choose and initiate activities. Although learning centers in the classroom include math, science lab, art, construction zone, media and technology, pretend and learn, ABC fun and a writing center, children are expected to spend a portion of their 60 minute learning center time in a small teacher directed group focusing on literacy or math development. With this design, the teacher has little time to spend scaffolding or modeling during center time.

The curriculum model provides teachers some flexibility to match individual children’s interests, but timelines and methods are fairly rigid. Each unit is four to five weeks long. In months that have a fifth week, it is suggested that you use this week as a time to review the previous units, the “Big Ideas”, and the vocabulary. Since it is only a suggestion, some centers are taking this opportunity to take a break from OWL to develop curriculum that follows the interests of the children in the class. Unfortunately, this is only a week long so it is not enough time to develop an in-depth unit around these interests.



Does the curriculum focus on higher level thinking?

There are few opportunities for children to engage in higher level thinking in the OWL curriculum. We found that most questions asked throughout the curriculum are closed questions with few true open-ended questions asked of children. The only portion of the curriculum to highlight higher-level thinking skills was during story time. It consists of having four out of the five lessons each week featuring a higher-level thinking portion of each lesson. A review of the curriculum shows that the ideas within each unit generally focus on discrete facts or skills with little integration across content areas.

Is the owl curriculum evidence-based?

Pearson states that they use scientific, evidence-based methods in the development of their curriculum, that they have a research team to integrate scientific research practices into the development of its curricula, and that they collaborate with regional education laboratories, universities, and private research companies to independently evaluate the effectiveness and usability of their curricula (Pearson Research Overview, n.d., p. 1). Although it is true that they base their curriculum on research based and research proven strategies and practices, which they lay out in detail in the teacher's guide (Dickenson, et.al, 2014, pp. 250-300), and also in the Pearson Research Overview (p.1), it does not necessarily mean that their actual curriculum is proven to show evidence of positive outcomes for children through rigorous independent research studies.

Most of the research that has been conducted on the OWL curriculum does not have a control group. These include the following:

- Eight preschool programs involved with a Reading First grant were studied. Children made gains in literacy skills. However, even with gains “many of the children in the sample were still low achievers when they entered Kindergarten” (p. 8). There was no control group in this study, so it is impossible to know if children made greater gains due to the OWL curriculum than they would have with another curriculum (Wilson, Morse, & Dickinson, 2009)
- In another study of Early Reading First programs, children who were in the OWL curriculum outperformed children who did not attend a preschool program. As the authors stated, “this is not a test of the effectiveness of the program against other preschool programs or business as usual. It is a test of the program against no formal preschool program.” (Wilson, Dickinson, & Rowe, 2013, p. 584).
- A field test of the OWL curriculum was conducted in eight classrooms in four different elementary schools to examine children's literacy and mathematics skills. The results indicated

that children made significant gains in both of these areas. However, since there was no control group it is not possible to know if children made greater gains than if they used a different curriculum (Pearson Academic and Product Research Group, 2016).

- Using information from the Work Sampling System from Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, Pearson examined the effectiveness of the OWL curriculum on socioemotional and physical skills. Children achieved significant gains in personal and social development and physical development and health. However, as with previous studies there was no control group (Pearson, n.d.).

There were two studies of the OWL curriculum that did contain a control group. In one study there was no significant difference between the OWL curriculum and control groups. In the other study, children who participated in Creative Curriculum outperformed children receiving the OWL curriculum.

- Researchers examined six programs (3 using OWL curriculum and 3 control groups). Children made statistically significant gains from pretest to posttest. However, the researchers found no significant differences in gains between the groups receiving the OWL curriculum and the control groups (Abdullah-Welsch, Schmidt, Hahn, Tafoya, & Sifuentes, 2009).
- A study examined children's language development at the end of kindergarten and at the end of first grade based upon three preschool language-focused curriculums (Creative Curriculum, OWL curriculum, and an enhanced version of OWL called OWL+EMT). Children receiving the OWL curriculum had significantly lower scores in vocabulary at the end of kindergarten and at the end of first grade and significantly lower scores in grammatical sophistication at the end of kindergarten than those children who had Creative Curriculum. Print knowledge was significantly higher in the OWL+EMT group than the other conditions at the end of kindergarten (Kaiser, Dickinson, Roberts, Darrow, Freiberg, & Hofer, 2011).

In addition to the lack of evidence and at time contradictory evidence that OWL is effective, most of the research has been conducted on the 2005 edition of OWL. The current 2014 edition is quite different and has few, if any studies, conducted on it.

The U.S Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance guide to Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User Friendly Guide (Coalition for Evidence Based Policy, 2003) states that for an intervention to have strong evidence of effectiveness that the "intervention be demonstrated effective, through well-designed randomized controlled trials, in more than one site of implementation and that these sites be typical school or community settings" (p. 10) To meet the criteria for possible evidence, there must be a closely matched, well designed comparison-group study that demonstrates effectiveness. Pre and post studies do not meet the threshold for "possible" evidence

of effectiveness (p.12). A review of the research has led us to the conclusion that the OWL curriculum does not meet the criteria to be considered evidence based.

The OWL curriculum is a comprehensive curriculum that encourages teachers to use a wide range of teaching techniques, including allowing children to learn through play. However, the curriculum is highly scripted, does not encourage in-depth learning, and does not meet the criteria to be considered evidence-based.

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