



Podcast 31: 6 Reasons Why Pacing Guides (And Other Ploys To Undermine Teachers) Won't Improve Student Outcomes

Episode notes: <https://preteachandplay.com/podcast31>

Hello fellow early childhood solutionaries! This is Kristie and in this episode, I'm talking to you about why I'm not a big fan of pacing guides when serving young children, particularly young children with diverse abilities.

I'll start off by explaining what I mean by pacing guides, so we can get on the same page. Then I'll explain why I see them as problematic. I'll go deep into two of my biggest concerns. One, which will actually lead us to asking a really critical question about what is the actual purpose of early care and education.

The second concern will remind us about how critical it is that we see the early years as a unique period in human development and what we do or how we conceptualize things for older students may not be appropriate for younger children. This is really essential for those of you who are thinking about Pre-K to third grade and/or where preschool fits into a district's initiatives.

Yes, we want to be considered as part of that system, but that doesn't mean that we accept push down practices and policies. I'll then wrap up this episode by sharing four additional concerns, just briefly, that I have about pacing guides, and mostly that's just to make my point and to give you a little bit more to think about.

Now, as you listen, keep in mind, I'll be referencing other podcast blogs, other writers, books, things that are out there in the world to consume by way of resources, but the transcript and the show notes for this episode will include links to any and all resources and authors that I mention, so don't feel like you have to capture everything as you listen.

You can download a transcript and access the show notes at preteachandplay.com/podcast31. There's also a freebie for this episode, and that freebie, which is a download, is a handout with several of the resources that I've created over the years that are related to what I call the [big ideas for early learning](#).

And, if you aren't familiar with what these big ideas are, you will be before this episode ends. So, you want to be sure to go to preteachandplay.com/podcast31 and download the freebie for this episode.



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Let's begin with what do I mean pacing guides? It's that there's something that exists that tells us what children should be learning and in the order in which they will learn it.

If any of you have listened to previous rants or podcasts by me, in particular, [podcast 26](#), I do talk about sequences and if you've read [Blended Practices](#) and you're like, "Hey Kristie, part of the curriculum framework is scope and sequence. So, what do you have against having what to teach and the order?"

So, those conversations about what is scope and what are appropriate sequences for young children, that's kind of the bigger issue that we don't want to get into in this episode. But you can go to prekteachandplay.com/podcast26, or you can look at any of my writings around blended practices with [Jennifer Grisham-Brown](#) and [Dr. Mary Louise Hemmeter](#) and you can learn more.

But what I'm trying to say to people when we talk about scope and sequence is that, yes, it's a necessary component, but it can't be in this really prescriptive way that says, "in the first quarter of the year or from late August to the first reporting period of teaching strategies goal on October 25th, this is what we will have covered and this is the order in which we will cover it".

Then, after that first reporting period or that first quarter, now we're going to move onto the second chunk of content. There's several reasons why that we're going to unpack in this episode about why I don't think that's an appropriate way to think of scope and sequence for young children.

But, the first thing is, I want to make sure you understand what I mean by a pacing guide. A pacing guide would be that thing that I said I don't like. It would be something that would say, "here's what children are expected to learn. This is the order in which they will learn it, and this is the timeline in which you will cover that content in that order".

So, something that is prescriptive in terms of what to teach, when to teach, and when to then shift to what you teach next. Hopefully, that made some sense and you understand or can kind of conceptualize what I'm calling a pacing guide.

So, if you just have scope and sequence and there's a great deal of flexibility, and you're using data-driven decisions to decide what to teach, when to teach, the order to teach, and that is variable from day-to-day, from child-to-child, from activity-to-activity, that's perfect. That's part of a curriculum framework. That's part of high quality instruction.

So, quick side note. If you aren't familiar with work around a [curriculum framework](#), there's another resource you might want to take a look at. Either pause this recording, go check it out, or after this





episode, go back to [podcast episode 30](#), where I talk about my issues around a canned curriculum and its replacement behavior, which is curriculum framework.

So, the same thing here. I'm not a big fan of pacing guides, but the replacement behavior, you can't see me doing air quotes around "replacement behavior", but I'm using that word purposely to say instead of doing pacing guides, what's the alternative?

And the alternative is to have clear scope and sequence that's part of your curriculum framework, and in order to understand what a good scope and sequence would be, that's what [podcast 30](#) is all about.

Okay. So, let's pretend that we're all on the same page now about what is, in my mind, a pacing guide for young children. Now, let's talk about what my concerns are.

First thing, if you think of a pacing guide as being very prescriptive about what we're going to teach, when we're going to teach it, and when we're going to be done basically teaching it, moving onto something else, it really begs the question: what is the purpose of early care in education?

Is it to determine that we can say with any given amount of certainty, "on October 12th or on February 14th or on May 9th, this is what my children of any year will be ready to learn"? My argument is that the purpose of early care and education is so much more dynamic and fluid that it's not just about these outcomes that we have set.

So, by prescribing or setting a pace, it really causes us to focus on the outcomes instead of what [Lillian Katz](#) would talk about, which is focusing on the experiences. I really want us to maintain that relationships are the active ingredient. I want us to look at early care and education as more than just covering the content, that it's about our relationships, that it's about our interactions. It's about play.

So, until we're clear on what the purpose of early care and education is, we'll quickly decide it's important to have a pacing guide so that everybody knows what's being covered, when it's being covered, and when to stop or start covering it.

I also think that this is problematic because if you think about early care and education, we don't yet, at the time of this recording, have true universal pre-K. So that means that the majority of children being served are either those with identified disabilities, disorders or delays, and/or children that are at risk for a disability delay.

So, when we think about children that are at risk or have already been identified, they're already children that we know that are going to learn something likely at a slower rate. You know, three years,





four years have passed, and they haven't learned the content that we would have thought. Those outcomes haven't been achieved.

We're also going to be thinking about they're maybe having challenges with processing language. This ability to remember is problematic. Maybe even just their self-regulation, or even if you go even deeper and their attention is of concern. Does that sound like any of the kids you serve?

Yeah, more than likely, you're like, "Yeah, my kids take longer to learn. They have language delays. They have trouble processing linguistic information. Their memory is like Groundhog Day, and regulation, oh, don't we wish?"

So, you put that altogether and you say, "Wow! This is going to take different instruction. This is going to take more explicit instruction. This is going to have to be things that we are going to intentionally think about the delivery, the pace, when you're ready for it, how much you're ready for, and it can't just be a one-sized fits all that by October, fill in the blank of a date. Everybody has learned it."

Also, just a quick side note. Remember that in early care and education, it's almost like a revolving door at times. We'll get new children in May, so if I only cover certain content from August to October, what happens for a child who enters the classroom in May? So, that's maybe a seventh problem that I've just raised.

But basically, the first concern is that it forces us to think mostly about outcomes and not about experiences, doesn't allow us to really think about what the purpose of early care and education is, and then it doesn't let us think deeply about what is important to be teaching children who are already by definition struggling because they're going to learn things at a slower rate, they're going to have struggles with processing linguistic information, with memory, with attention and so forth and so on.

So, the research would really show us that in that instance, these learners need us to cover not more content, but to go deeper or to be more strategic. It's really focusing in on the "big ideas." So that's what I mentioned early on in this podcast I'd be talking about, are the big ideas.

There's a whole literature based on this, and in the show notes, I'll put links to some of the research around big ideas for older students around math, literacy, social studies, science, and even art, but we have a body of work around the [big ideas for early learning](#) for preschool. Maybe think of it being efficient and effective.

So, what we really want to think about is how will I explicitly teach what children have missed? How will I give greater focus on big ideas instead of trying to cover more content around discreet outcomes?



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So, when children are missing the background, the prerequisites, the skills to be moving forward, my go-to needs to be stop and focus on those big ideas, not cover more content. Okay, that's number one.

The second thing, the second bigger concern that I have is that we don't really honor the diversity or the uniqueness of early development and learning when we focus on pacing guides. So, if we have that pacing guide, it's very prescriptive, it

tells me what to teach, in what order, and again, when to start and stop that teaching of that content in that order; we haven't really thought about how unique this period of human development is.

So, we know that development becomes more variable the older the child becomes. So, if you've got a three-year-old and then a four-year-old, and then a five-year-old, with each passing year, the bandwidth of when a skill may emerge actually becomes greater; the tolerance, if you will, of when something might be of concern that they do or do not have it, that window becomes bigger, not smaller.

So, that means that we could say a child has a skill of playing cooperatively and that might happen at three, three-and-a-half, four, four-and-a-half, five- anywhere in that window- we would see this still as an emerging skill.

So, when we think about covering the content of learning how to play cooperatively, if that only happens in a short window, like a quarter or a test period, that's not in line with what we know about development, which might be a three-year time span of where we need to circle back, practice, try again, and so forth.

It also doesn't help us think about how skills in these early years are really complex. Let's stay with that place cooperatively and they're happening currently. So, motor development (fine and gross), self-regulation, social/emotional, language, cognition- all of this is happening and impacting a child's ability to play cooperatively.

So, when we tease things apart into these discreet outcomes, then we stop thinking about the concurrent nature of development. Then, as I mentioned in [podcast 26](#), I talk about different sequencing, so until you can try to really get your head wrapped around developmental, pedagogical, and logical sequences that are all being observed in the preschool years, we can't think about sequential always being very linear and being based upon the calendar, right?





The August to October, the October to February, the February to May notion of the pacing guide. So, that's my second big concern is that we don't respect what we know about early learning and development.

We don't really keep our focus on their ability as it gets greater, these are completely complex skills that are happening concurrently and development is completely interdependent and that not all sequences are this very nice linear progression...but rather we have development, pedagogical, and logical sequences that need to be considered.

Again, you might want to refer back to [podcast 26](#), maybe even [nine](#), where there are references that talk a lot about the concurrent nature of development. So, those are my two biggest concerns with pacing guides as I defined it in the opening part of this podcast episode.

Let me say four more things just to make my point. First of all, pacing guides may or may not have ages or grade markers that have been empirically derived. So, it might say, "this is what you should learn at 36 months, at 40 months, at 42 months, at 48 months." Where did those age markers come from?

Oftentimes, just like with state standards or different assessments that have age equivalencies, these have just been based upon either the wisdom of the author. Maybe there was a task force, maybe there was a review of literature, and sort of the average age was then decided upon and placed as the marker, but generally speaking, we call this having face validity.

This doesn't have real merit in terms of empirically derived evidence that this is, when in fact, a skill actually merges in human development.

Second, we may or may not account for the role of stressors or these toxins in a child's life and the impact that that will have on their neurodevelopment. So those neuropathways and those connections and that connectivity are going to be pruned, or that phrase- neurons that fire together, wire together- will be impacted because the neurons aren't firing together so they can't wire together.

So, we may see children who are doing things at a slower rate or are missing skills because they've actually been exposed to stressors or toxins, and without the removal or the reduction of those stressors, we're never going to get neuropathways to connect; so, keep covering content at the pace that the guide says, but what really needs to be addressed is these stressors and toxins a child is being exposed to.





The next one is that when we think of pacing guides, we tend to oversimplify the complexity of early learning and development. Maybe this is redundant with the things I've already said, but maybe it's worth saying again. All too often, people think that preschool is "just playing."

We think preschool doesn't need to be something that requires strong professional development of the people who are delivering it or for that matter, quality pay, support, or our utmost respect that we really need to change our mindset that some of the most important work we can do is building children's brains and that happens in the early years, and so the complexity is sort of diminished when we think we can create a pacing guide.

And then lastly, I feel like a pacing guide just puts us right back into our disciplined specific silos. It really gets us thinking about discreet skills. It doesn't really allow for or encourage or invite us to think about whole child; transdisciplinary, play-based exploration. Instead, it puts us back to this notion of a checklist that I can cover the content and the children will magically learn.

If you go all the way back to my first concern about the children, primarily the children that are being served as threes, fours, and five-year-olds in the United States at least, we really need to see that their development is already compromised in some way and then, if you layer that with the stressors and the toxins I briefly mentioned, we've got to do something different and that doesn't mean covering more discreet skills at a predetermined pace. It means addressing big ideas explicitly during play.

So, hopefully some of that, all of that, maybe a little piece of that resonates with you and gives you a sense of why I'm not a big fan of pacing guides in the early years, knowing that the "replacement behavior" is certainly to still have a curriculum framework and have scope and sequence part of the replacement behavior. Or the answer is to focus in on the big ideas, those experiences, to get more mileage out of the instruction we are able to deliver, and definitely to look at early development in terms of its complexity so that we can think about the sequences that make sense and then engage in a data-driven decision making process that will allow us to know what to teach, when to teach, where to teach, what to teach with and how to teach.

I'll put more things in the show notes that will give you additional things to read and explore, and then certainly you want to go to prekteachandplay.com/podcast31 and download freebies for this episode, because it will give you several links to what are the big ideas for early learning, how do you use the big ideas as part of your scope and sequence, and how do you use that as a replacement to pacing guides?

As always, I'd love to come to your district to connect with, train, and to continue to encourage you to be inspired educators. So, contact me at kristiepf.com to speak at your next conference or event, and thank you solutionaries, for all you do to help children thrive in school and in life.



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