Children Come First: Linking a Whole Child/Play–Based Approach to the Education and Development of Young Children

Carla Garrett, Sharon Ritchie, & Eva Phillips

August 2023

To teach young children well involves ensuring they experience a child-centered, play-based, high-quality learning environment focused on supporting all their developmental needs – social, emotional, cognitive, and physical. Knowledge of how children within a given age span typically develop and learn provides a general framework to guide educators in preparing the learning environment, designing learning experiences, and interacting effectively and productively with children. To meet the needs of children's learning and development, the physical environment, instructional methods, behavioral expectations, and content should be adjusted gradually and smoothly.

Knowledge about the sequences in which children gain specific concepts, skills, and abilities informs curriculum development and instructional practice. Research has consistently supported the contention that the implementation of a curriculum that promotes positive, long-term achievement in academic settings:

- is sensitive to the developmental capabilities and backgrounds of the individual children.
- addresses the multiple domains of children's development.
- supports children as active participants in their learning process.
- integrates learning across developmental and content-based domains.

(Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001).

Decades of research tell us that play is an essential part of children's healthy growth and development. Early childhood experts have long agreed that young children who are provided with rich play-based learning environments excel in all domains of development and learning. Through an interactive, play-based curriculum, children develop cognitive skills as they "explore,

Play is truly the indispensable work of children.

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imagine, imitate, construct, discuss, plan, manipulate, problem-solve, dramatize, create, and experiment" (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009, p.215).

Development Across the Domains

Social and Emotional Development

Positive, nurturing relationships are essential to children's capacity to explore their classroom and actively engage in learning opportunities. A caring atmosphere needs to be in place before substantive learning can occur. A caring atmosphere is foundational to children's success as it ensures they feel safe, valued, and accepted. Teachers can nurture warm relationships in many ways as they respond sensitively to children's everyday needs, interact in emotionally supportive ways, listen, and converse with sincere attention, and model and provide opportunities for children to support each other while building classroom community.

When teachers provide practice, guidance and support for positive interactions and recognize the damaging impact of negative interactions, they are actively increasing the likelihood of success for their students.

A curriculum that addresses children's social and emotional development focuses on providing daily opportunities to understand and regulate actions and emotions, experience pride and success with learning across domains, and become productive members of a classroom (Hyson, 2018).

Engaging in play allows children repeated opportunities to learn to negotiate relationships, space, and materials in relevant and effective ways.

Without consistent opportunities to develop self-regulation, it is unlikely that children will be well-prepared to maintain impulse control, motivate themselves, persist through difficult situations, and utilize effective academic strategies to independently master new information (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011); Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Cognitive Development

For children to acquire knowledge and skills, teachers must consistently offer children opportunities to talk about what they think and the reasons behind their thinking. After all, the one doing the talking is the one doing the learning. Providing regular, intentional time for children to talk, provides rich opportunities for teachers to know and understand what and how children think and learn. This enables teachers to be aware of the impact their teaching has on children's knowledge acquisition. When we prioritize **quality** of instruction over **quantity** of content, we support children to take in information, make sense of it, and commit it to memory. Play helps children increase their memory, critical thinking, oral language, literacy, and mathematical and problem-solving skills and lays the foundation for all academic learning

(Elkind, 2007; Gullo, 2006; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019; Yogman et al., 2018).

Physical Development

Given the pressures of accountability, it has become too easy to neglect the fact that good nutrition, movement, exercise, and access to the outdoors support children's learning. Non-nutritious foods and physical inactivity contribute to health complications that include obesity, heart disease and diabetes, especially in African American, Latino, and low-income populations. Brain research helps us recognize the important contribution of physical activity to learning and suggests that physical play and activity, prior to and during class, increase students' ability to process and retain new material (Kubesch et al., 2009; Ratey, 2008).

The Contribution of Play to Development Across the Domains

Young children provided with rich play-based learning environments excel in all domains of development and learning. In addition, teachers who support, and facilitate meaningful play-based experiences for their students, strengthen relationships while gleaning critical information about the individual and collective development of the children. "Through pretend play, young children consolidate their understanding of the world, language, and their social skills. The skillful teacher of young children is one who makes play possible, and helps children keep getting better at it" (Jones and Reynolds, 2011. Pp 7). "Preschool and early elementary students are experiential learners–they learn by doing rather than figuring things out only by thinking about them. This makes shared, physical, play-based activities with educators and peers especially effective opportunities for learning" (Kauerz, K., Ballard, R., Soli, M., & Hagerman, S. (2020. p1).

Purposeful play, supported and facilitated by adults, offers children opportunities to meet developmental needs and provides them opportunities to develop skills and knowledge in all subject areas. When opportunities are relevant to children's experiences and unique ways of learning, teachers can also learn more about children's conceptual understandings and their abilities to apply newly learned skills in authentic ways. Play is the way young children construct their understanding of the world and therefore, teachers who observe closely and participate with children in play, construct their own understanding of their students' lives and their growth and development.

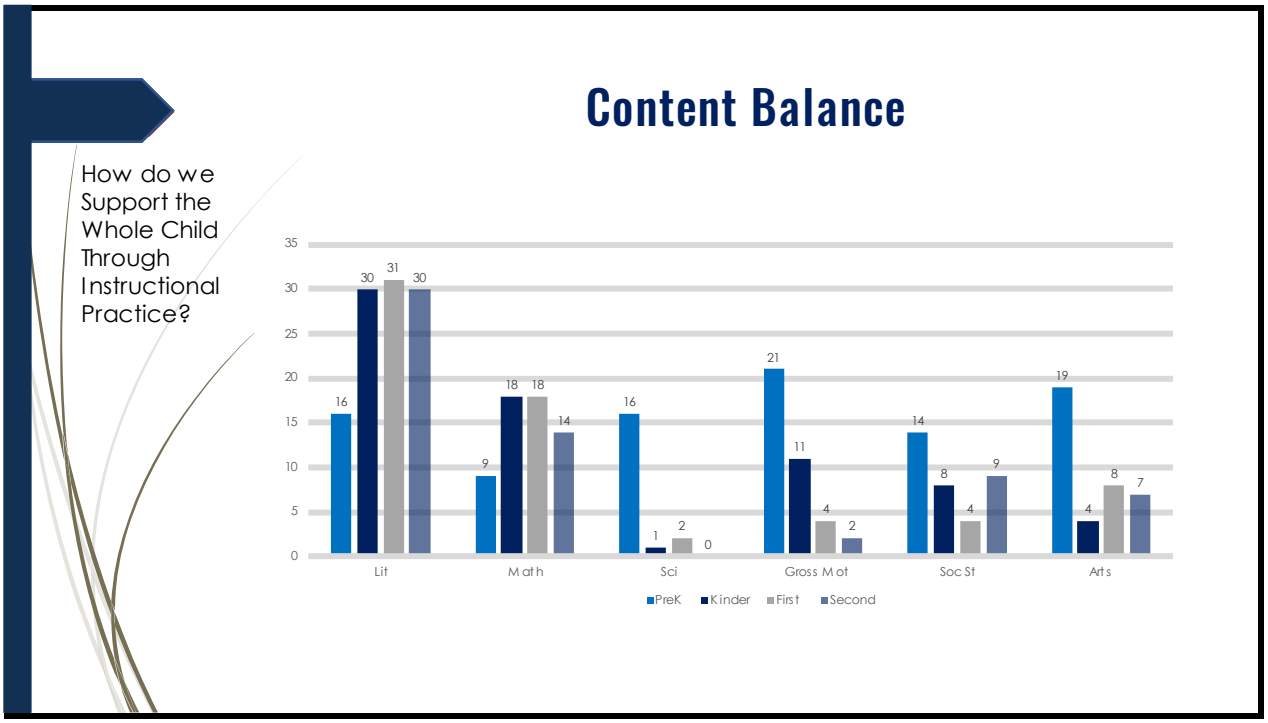
The Contribution of Balanced Content, Experiences, and Settings to Development Across the Domains

Effective teachers ensure that time is devoted to all content areas, and that adequate time is provided daily for children to learn curriculum content in a variety of settings. A balance of content and settings reflect recognition of the importance of the development of the whole

child and the understanding that what children are exposed to early on will ultimately shape the kinds of minds they possess as adults. Effective teachers recognize that teaching a rich, balanced curriculum supports the developing brain architecture and can significantly impact closing the achievement gap, sometimes called the "experience or opportunity gap."

Many young children, especially children of color and those from less advantaged homes, need access to libraries, museums, zoos, gardens, and planetariums. Without school, they may never know about, or perhaps visit, such places. Science, social studies, and the creative arts are vital parts of a well-rounded education. Omitting time to explore these areas means ignoring the valuable vocabulary inherent in the subject matter, depriving children of exploring the physical world, learning of other places and cultures, and exposure to the creative expression offered through music, art, and dance.

Figure 1 Content Balance



These data come from nationwide studies using the EduSnap Data Collection Tool. For more information go to https://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/using-data-create-culture-collaborative-inquiry.html.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of time children have the opportunity to engage in a broad and rich curriculum. Each percentage point represents 4 minutes of the instructional day.

Data from hundreds of classrooms across the nation demonstrate a neglect of science, gross motor activity, social studies, and the arts in kindergarten, first- and second-grade classrooms. Although research indicates that all domains of development and learning are important and interrelated, data reveal that classrooms continue an over-emphasis on literacy and math, to the detriment of children's exposure to a rich and varied curriculum.

For example, in PreK, 16% (64 minutes) of their day provides them the opportunity to engage in literacy practices, while in kindergarten that time nearly doubles. In PreK, children engage in science (weather, animals, rocks, experiments, etc.) 16% (64 minutes) of their day in first grade, on average children experience 2% (8 minutes) per day of science. These data come from nationwide studies using the *EduSnap Data Collection Tool*. For more information, go to https://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/using-data-create-culture-collaborative-inquiry.html

The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) affirms that learning science and engineering practices in the early years can foster children's curiosity and enjoyment in exploring the world around them and lay the foundation for a progression of science learning in K–12 settings and throughout their entire lives.

Literacy and mathematics are, and should be, part of a child's daily life. However, young children learn best when literacy and math concepts are integrated into routines, and other everyday experiences in engaging and meaningful ways that involve all domains of development (e.g., physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and approaches to learning).

Activity Settings

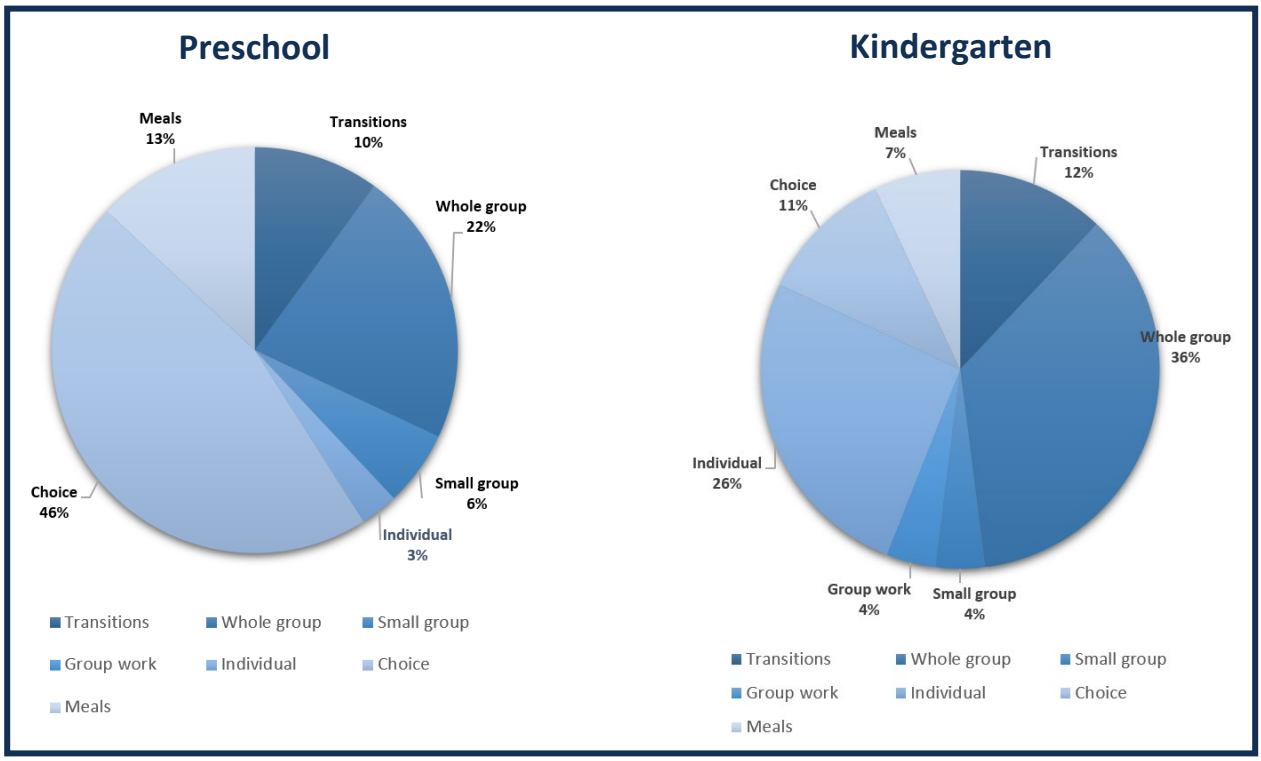
Offering a variety of engaging and appropriately challenging learning settings, providing guidance and support, celebrating diversity, and creating safe and nurturing spaces for young children to grow and develop, are all essential to ensure that all young children, no matter their circumstances, can thrive.

Data from hundreds of classrooms nationwide demonstrate poor alignment of children's experiences as they move between preschool and kindergarten. Seamless transitions are essential to children's success, yet we predominantly see that choice time, which allows for play, and the development of self-regulation is replaced in kindergarten by significant periods of time spent in whole group and individual time…times chiefly led by teachers, focused primarily on math and literacy, and offering few opportunities for interaction (Ritchie, Gutmann, 2013). Children are ill-prepared for this dramatic change in their experience of school, and the practices are not appropriate to their developmental needs or abilities.

Smoothing this transition will assure success for far more children and will allow them to continue to hone their skills and talents.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of time children spend in different activity settings. Note the stark differences between the experiences of preschool children and those of kindergarten children.

Figure 2: Alignment of Preschool and Kindergarten Classroom Activities



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The goal is for all young children to experience a child-centered, play-based, high-quality learning environment. This type of learning environment is focused on supporting all developmental needs with the resources, space, time, and support young children need to connect emotionally and socially, to the world, their peers, teachers, classrooms, and communities. Teaching young children is so much more than just nurturing their cognitive development. Nurturing the whole child is key.

INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

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- ✓ How are the goals for linking a play-based approach to the development and learning of young children being addressed and met? Think specifically about each of these aspects and examine strengths and challenges as well as next steps.
  - ➢ Child-Centered
  - ➢ Play-Based
  - ➢ High-Quality
  - ➢ Resources
  - ➢ Space
  - ➢ Time
  - ➢ Support
- ✓ What domains of development and learning (such as physical, social, emotional, and cognitive) are consistently evident in your classrooms?
- ✓ Does the attention to the whole child vary across the Preschool-Third Grade span? If so, why?
- ✓ In what ways might you ensure that all needs of the children are met?
- ✓ How does teaching and learning encompass the cultural diversity in your learning environment?
- ✓ Look at classroom daily schedules.
  - ➢ How are children spending time?
  - ➢ How much time is allocated for choice, whole group, and individual activities?
  - ➢ How are the experiences of children aligned across grade levels?
  - ➢ What's working?
  - ➢ What needs to be adjusted?

For further information see the white paper in our **Children Come First** series: Using Research to Guide Practice at https://region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/ or visit the Early Childhood web page at: https//region6cc.uncg.edu/early childhood/.

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Garrett, C., Ritchie, S., Phillips, E.C. (2023). Children Come First: Linking a Whole Child/Play-Based Approach to the Education and Development of Young Children. SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro.

Acknowledgements: The authors are grateful to the members of the SERVE Early Learning Collaborative for their contributions to, and review of the final document.

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This brief was prepared by the Region 6 Comprehensive Center under Award #S283B190055 for the Office of Program and Grantee Support Services (PGSS) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) of the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by the SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro. The content in this document does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the PGSS or OESE or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.