Children Come First: Uniting the Best of Early Childhood and Elementary Education Practices

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To create coherence across grades and across systems, efforts to make major strides in a preschool through third grade approach require input and participation from all stakeholders including school districts, central offices, schools, early childhood programs, schools of education, and families.

This level of coherence is a tall order and one that has stymied real progress over the years. Disparate philosophies, values, funding streams, and infrastructure cannot seem to find resolution, and work is regularly stalled, or never even makes it to the discussion stage. Further complicating the matter is the absence of relationships and clear communication amongst schools and community partners.

In order to utilize an existing strong knowledge base to ensure that the preschool through third grade experience provides a firm foundation of learning for each child, school practices should build on "uniting the best" of early childhood and elementary education. The creation of positive and doable steps that would guarantee an effective trajectory for children begins with the consensus that both the Early Childhood Education (ECE) and K-12 systems already have things in place that could contribute significantly to the practice of the other; ultimately creating positive outcomes for children.

> First steps to "uniting the best" include developing relationships among early learning partners that include community partners, elementary education partners, and families.

Marc Bornstein (2009, p. 139) poses the question, "What about the child's mind should we consider when interacting with and teaching the child?" His answer is that we currently focus on a far too limited and limiting view of children's abilities. School for young children could be truly transformed if we concentrated on and implemented what we know about how children develop and learn best.

The blending of sound elementary education teaching strategies that focus on content knowledge, with the child development pedagogies of early childhood education that focus on cognitive, physical, and social-emotional growth, is needed to provide the early educator with the skills and knowledge to engage in meaningful and productive teaching. Scholars argue that teachers who understand how learning occurs are better able to select and develop content and curricula that support the learning process (Bransford et al., 2005, pp. 1-39). Teachers who understand child development and learning are more likely to select learning experiences, tasks, materials, and instructional strategies that meet children where they are, maintain their motivation, and move them toward greater competence (Horowitz et al., 2005).

> Overall, teachers and administrators need to have a solid understanding of child development from ages three to eight, the content of the curriculum in all areas, and the process of learning.

For example, the quality of emotional interactions, typically emphasized in preschool, coupled with the literacy and math instruction, typically emphasized in the elementary years, have long-term impact on children's achievement; thus, there should be simultaneous and equal efforts to provide these experiences across the preschool-third grade span. (Pianta et al., 2008).

Along with the need for teachers who understand child development and learning, administrators also need such an understanding to effectively support teachers as they strive "to ensure that PreK-3rd grade students engage in purposeful, creative play throughout the day to strengthen the development of critical thinking, problem solving, self-regulation, and language skills" (NAESP, 2021, p. 81). Administrators also must recognize the importance of prioritizing relationships among students, teachers, staff, and families. Intentionally involving families can ensure that they feel connected, and that the needs of their children are being met. These parallel processes are vital to the development of the full school community thus resulting in the opportunity for children to experience continuity across the preschool-third grade continuum.

Typically, data collection and use examine what is valued. What is valued at preschool tends to differ dramatically from that valued in the early elementary years. Data that provide information and guidance on program quality is prevalent in ECE, while data that provide information and guidance on student and teacher performance is prevalent in elementary classrooms. Valuing both would contribute to understanding what and how children are learning and developing, and an understanding that "uniting the best" of each is in the best interests of the children (Oertwig et al., 2015, pp. 137-152).

Overall, teachers and administrators need to have a solid understanding of child development from ages three to eight, the content of the curriculum in all areas, and the process of learning. This understanding translates into an integrated approach to instruction and classroom practice. Many conventional dichotomies such as play versus academic rigor, teacher-led instruction versus learner-driven exploration, inferential learning versus direct instruction, breadth versus depth, and a focus on head (intellectual concepts and skills) versus heart (social-emotional

development and engagement of passion) need to become synergies rather than choices or compromises. (Bardige et al., 2018, p. 4).

Let's Value All of It! Child Development Across the P-3 Continuum

The following chart reflects the areas of emphasis in the birth through age five, the kindergarten through 12th grade, and the preschool through third grade systems.

0-5	K-12	P-3
Child at the center of learning	Teacher/curriculum standards at the center of learning	Play-based learning
Emphasizes child development-social, emotional, physical, cognitive	Rigorous instruction	Rigorous instruction emphasizing whole child development
Formative assessment	Summative assessment	Formative and summative assessment
Focus on program/classroom quality	Focus on teacher/administrator quality	Focus on program/classroom and teacher/administrator quality
Environmental assessments as basis for accountability	Child assessments as basis for accountability	Focuses on environmental and child assessments as basis for accountability

(Kauerz, 2019)

First steps to "uniting the best" include developing relationships among early learning partners that include community partners, elementary education partners, and families. Along with the establishment of relationships, communication should be frequent and ongoing. School principals, in particular, have the power through their leadership to support these relationships and communication. "A deft and informed school principal will be necessary to bring these two galaxies (early education and primary education) into common space" (Kauerz, 2019, as cited in Takanishi, 2016). These steps open the door for collaboration and growth opportunities such as joint professional development, the use of multiple funding sources to ensure equitable access to various opportunities, alignment of instructional practices, and alignment and coordination of policies and programs.

Creating coherence and alignment of practices across the preschool through third grade years is imperative for children's success. Combining an emphasis about whole child growth and development as well as academic content and learning provides a solid foundation for all children and ensures that programs effectively meet the unique needs of young children across the preschool through third grade years.

INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

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- ✓ Does your district offer full day preschool? If yes,
  - ➢ Are services available to all children? If not, who are the children who are not being served?
  - ➢ Are the preschool classes considered a "separate" program? Who administers the preschool program?
  - ➢ Who evaluates the teachers?
  - ➢ Are preschool teachers included in staff meetings/PD?
  - ➢ Are preschool children able to access before/after school and summer care?
  - ➢ Do preschool and early grade teachers plan together (vertical alignment as well as horizontal alignment)?
  - ➢ Are preschool families included in schoolwide events?

- ✓ If not, why not? Think about possible resources that could be utilized to serve young children.
  - ✓ Does rigorous instruction with attention to the whole child vary across the preschool–third grade span? If so, how? Why?
  - ✓ What are some ways to support alignment (curriculum, assessment, environment) across the preschool–third grade continuum?
  - ✓ In what ways do teachers create a balance between an emphasis on whole child growth and development and academic content and learning? In what ways do administrators support teachers in their efforts to create this balance?
  - ✓ Is joint professional development provided for preschool–third grade? Are community partners included?

For further information see our white paper Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes. Greensboro, NC: SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro, or visit the Early Childhood web page.

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