Class 2

Overview of EC Programs

Articles:

The Power of Our Words

Twelve Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Teachers

A Foundation for Success

Discussion Questions:

How does language shape learners?
The article presents five principles for positive language. Have you observed any being used effectively?

Why do you feel drawn to the EC teaching field?

The article lists twelve characteristics of effective teachers based on a survey of EC teachers. Which four characteristics do you think are the most important? Which ones do you already have?

High quality preschools produce more positive effects than low quality programs. What are some of the elements found in high quality programs?

What should be part of a high quality pre-K program?

The Power of Our Words

Teacher language influences students' identities as learners. Five principles keep that influence positive.

PAULA DENTON

Think back to your childhood and recall the voices of your teachers. What kinds of words did they use? What tone of voice? Recall how you felt around those teachers. Safe and motivated to learn? Or self-doubting, insecure, even angry?

Teacher language—what we say to students and how we say it—is one of our most powerful teaching tools. It permeates every aspect of teaching. We cannot teach a lesson, welcome a student into the room, or handle a classroom conflict without using words. Our language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.

How Language Shapes Learners

From my 25 years of teaching and my research on language use, I've learned that language actually *shapes* thoughts, feelings, and experiences. (Vygotsky, 1978). Our words shape students as learners by

- *Affecting students' sense of identity.* Five-year-old Don loves to sing but isn't good at it—yet. His music teacher says, "Let's have you move to the back row and try just mouthing the words." Such language can lead Don to believe not only that he is a bad singer, but also that he will always be a bad singer. But suppose the teacher says, "Don, you really love to sing, don't you? Would you like to learn more about it? I have some ideas." Such words support Don's budding identity as one who loves to sing and is learning singing skills.
- *Helping students understand how they work and play.* For example, an educator might comment on a student's writing by saying, "These juicy adjectives here give me a wonderful sense of how your character looks and feels." Naming a specific attribute—the use of adjectives—alerts the writer to an important strength in her writing and encourages her to build on that strength.
- *Influencing our relationships with students.* To a student who—once again—argued with classmates at recess, we might say either "Emory, if you don't stop it, no more recess!" or "Emory, I saw you arguing with Douglas and Stephen. Can you help me understand what happened from your point of view?" The former would reinforce a teacher-student relationship based on teacher threats and student defensiveness, whereas the latter would begin to build a teacher-student relationship based on trust.

Five Guiding Principles for Positive Language

How can we ensure that our language supports students' learning and helps create a positive, respectful community? During the 20 years I've been involved with the Responsive Classroom, I have found this approach to be a good base for using language powerfully. The Responsive Classroom approach, developed by Northeast Foundation for Children, offers language strategies that enable elementary teachers to help students succeed academically and socially. Strategies range from asking open-ended questions that stretch students' thinking to redirecting students when behavior goes off-track. These strategies are based on the following five general principles.

1. Be Direct

When we say what we mean and use a kind, straightforward tone, students learn that they can trust us. They feel respected and safe, a necessary condition for developing self-discipline and taking the risks required for learning.

It's easy to slip into using indirect language as a way to win compliance. For example, as a new teacher, I tried to get students to do what I wanted by pointing out what I liked about other students' behavior. "I like the way May and Justine are paying attention," I would cheerfully announce while impatiently eyeing Dave and Marta fooling around in the corner.

When this strategy worked, it was because students mimicked the desired behavior so that they, too, would win praise from me, not because I had helped them develop self-control or internal motivation. And often, when I pointed out how I liked

certain learners' behavior, the rest of the class ignored me. If I liked the way May and Justine were paying attention, that was nice for the three of us, but it had nothing to do with the rest of the class, who had more compelling things to do at the moment.

Moreover, comparative language can damage students' relationships. By holding May and Justine up as exemplars, I implied that the other class members were less commendable. This can drive a wedge between students.

Later in my career, I learned to speak directly. To call the students to a meeting, for example, I rang a chime to gain their attention (a signal we practiced regularly), then said firmly, "Come to the meeting rug and take a seat now." To Dave and Marta in the previous example, I'd say, "It's time to listen now." The difference in students' response was remarkable.

Sarcasm, another form of indirect language, is also common—and damaging—in the classroom. Sometimes teachers use sarcasm because we think it will provide comic relief; other times we're just tired, and it slips in without our even knowing it. If a teacher says, "John, what part of 'Put your phone away' don't you understand?" students will likely laugh, and the teacher may think she has shown that she's hip and has a sense of humor. But John will feel embarrassed, and his trust in this teacher will diminish. The position of this teacher may shift in the other students' eyes as well: They no longer see her as an authority who protects their emotional safety but as someone who freely uses the currency of insult. Much better to simply say, "John, put your phone away." If he doesn't, try another strategy, such as a logical consequence.

2. Convey Faith in Students' Abilities and Intentions

When our words and tone convey faith in students' desire and ability to do well, students are more likely to live up to our expectations of them.

"When everyone is ready, I'll show you how to plant the seeds." "You can look at the chart to remind yourself of our ideas for good story writing." "Show me how you will follow the rules in the hall." These teacher words, spoken in a calm voice, communicate a belief that students want to—and know how to—listen, cooperate, and do good work. This increases the chance that students will see themselves as respectful listeners, cooperative people, and competent workers, and behave accordingly.

Take the time to notice and comment on positive behavior, being quite specific: "You're trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence." Such observations give students hard evidence for why they should believe in themselves.

3. Focus on Actions, Not Abstractions

Because elementary-age children tend to be concrete thinkers, teachers can communicate most successfully with them by detailing specific actions that will lead to a positive environment. For example, rather than saying, "Be respectful," it's more helpful to state, "When someone is speaking during a discussion, the rest of us will listen carefully and wait until the speaker is finished before raising our hands to add a comment."

Sometimes it's effective to prompt students to name concrete positive behaviors themselves. To a student who has trouble focusing during writing time, a teacher might say matter-of-factly, "What will help you think of good ideas for your story and concentrate on writing them down?" The student might then respond, "I can find a quiet place to write, away from my friends."

There is a place, of course, for such abstract terms as *respectful* and responsible, but we must give students plenty of opportunities to associate those words with concrete actions. Classroom expectations such as "treat one another with kindness" will be more meaningful to students if we help them picture and practice what those expectations look like in different situations.

Focusing on action also means pointing to the desired *behavior* rather than labeling the learner's character or attitude. I had a student who chronically did poor work when he could do better. In a moment of frustration, I said to him, "I don't think you even care!" This allowed me to vent, but it did nothing to help the student change. His energy went toward defending himself against my negative judgment, not toward examining and changing his behavior. Worse, such language can lead students to accept our judgment and believe that they indeed don't care.

It's more helpful in such situations to issue a positive challenge that names the behavior we want: "Your job today is to record five observations of our crickets. Think about what you'll need to do before you start." This moves the focus to what the student can do.

4. Keep It Brief

It's hard for many young children to follow long strings of words like this:

> When you go out to recess today, be sure to remember what we said about including everyone in games, because yesterday some kids had an issue with not being included in kickball and four square, and we've talked about this. You were doing really well for a while there, but lately it seems like you're getting kind of careless, and that's got to change or . . .

By the end of this spiel, many students would be thinking about other things. Few could follow the entire explanation. Students understand more when we speak less. Simply asking, "Who can tell us one way to include everyone at recess?" gives them an opportunity to remind themselves of positive behaviors. If you have taught and led students in practicing the class's expectations for recess, students will make good use of such a reminder.

5. Know When to Be Silent

The skillful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skillful use of words. When teachers use silence, we open a space for students to think, rehearse what to say, and sometimes gather the courage to speak at all.

We can see the benefit of silence if, after asking a question, we pause before taking responses from students. Researchers have found that when teachers wait three to five seconds, more students respond, and those responses show higher-level thinking (Swift & Gooding, 1983; Tobin, 1980).

Three to five seconds can feel uncomfortably long at first. But if we stick to it—and model thoughtful pausing by waiting a few seconds ourselves to respond to students' comments—we'll set a pace for the entire classroom that will soon feel natural. Our reward will be classroom conversations of higher quality.

Remaining silent allows us to listen to students and requires us to resist the impulse to jump in and correct students' words or finish their thoughts. A true listener tries to understand a speaker's message before formulating a response. When we allow students to speak uninterrupted and unhurried, we help them learn because speaking is an important means of consolidating knowledge.

In my current role teaching educators Responsive Classroom strategies, I watch teachers incorporate these five principles of language into their daily communications with students, and I see them build classrooms where students feel safe, respected, and engaged. By paying attention to our language, we can use it to open the doors of possibility for students.

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Author's note—A 2006 study by Sara Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues at the University of Virginia showed that Responsive Classroom practices were associated with students having higher reading and math test scores, better social skills, and more positive feelings about school. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences has awarded Rimm-Kaufman a $2.9 million grant to further investigate how Responsive Classroom practices contribute to gains in students' math achievement.

Twelve Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Teachers

LAURA J. COLKER

What does it take to be an effective early childhood teacher? This is a question that has long gnawed at reflective teacher educators, idealistic teachers (especially those just beginning their careers), and worried families who place their young children in the care of another adult. Many educators feel that effectiveness as a teacher stems from a combination of knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics (Katz 1993).

While aspiring teachers can increase their knowledge and develop their skills, their personal characteristics—which involve the socioemotional and spiritual realms in addition to the cognitive—are likely to be more fixed. As Cantor (1990) notes, one can have both knowledge and skills, but without a disposition to make use of them, very little will happen. *Having* is not the same as *doing*.

Because personal characteristics are rooted in feelings and beliefs, we can neither observe them directly nor assess them through traditional methods (Ostorga 2003), which makes them difficult to identify. Nevertheless, teacher educators and administrators would benefit greatly from knowing the characteristics of an effective early childhood teacher, as they strive to improve the quality of the field. New teachers and those at a crossroads in their career would also benefit if they could confirm that the interpersonal and intrapersonal beliefs they possess are those demanded by the field.

Reviewing the Literature

With these goals in mind, this article summarizes an attempt to identify some of the key characteristics early childhood teachers need to excel in their job. This is by no means a novel idea. The literature cites numerous examples of positive teacher dispositions (Ebro 1977; Smith 1980; Glenn 2001; Usher 2003; Adams & Pierce 2004). These examples often include characteristics such as enthusiasm and a good attitude.

Although they serve a definite need, the existing examples have limitations. Characteristics, or *dispositions,* as they are sometimes called, are frequently used interchangeably with traits and skills in the literature, when in fact they are not the same. DaRos-Voseles and Fowler-Hughey (2007) make the point that traits, unlike dispositions, are unconscious behavioral habits. Skills such as "being organized," "having command of the classroom," and "asking probing questions" are teacher abilities but not characteristics.

A second problem with the current literature on teacher characteristics is that most of the lists of characteristics were developed with teachers of students in grades beyond the primary years in mind. Indeed, the most common focus is on teachers in higher education; none of the lists of desired teacher characteristics apply exclusively to early childhood teachers. Such a list would certainly benefit the field. Because early childhood teachers need unique knowledge and skills, it is also likely that they need to have characteristics that are unique to them as a group.

A final limitation of the existing literature is that in most instances, teacher educators are the ones attempting to define characteristics of effective teachers. While there is value in this approach, dispositions compiled by experts working with practitioners do not necessarily represent characteristics that practitioners themselves consider important. Because characteristics involve personal perceptions, consulting the beliefs of those doing the job is essential when drawing up a master list of characteristics common among effective early childhood teachers.

In the literature, there are two exceptions in which researchers solicited practitioner perceptions. A study at Ball State University (Johnson 1980) surveyed 227 Indiana public school teachers and 14 school principals to determine the characteristics correlated with teacher effectiveness.

Teachers reported four key characteristics. According to these respondents, effective teachers

- Have a sound knowledge of subject matter.
- Take a personal interest in each student.
- Establish a caring/loving/warm atmosphere.
- Show enthusiasm with students.

Principals offered a slightly different list of characteristics they consider most important. They said effective teachers

- Conduct thorough instructional planning/organizing.
- Are child oriented.
- Show enthusiasm with students.

A more recent study (Taylor & Wash 2003) at Lander University surveyed 3,000 K–12 teachers and administrators in seven school districts. Participants completed a modified Delphi survey, ranking the priority of dispositions indispensable to K–12 teachers. Survey participants identified the following as the top 10 characteristics (in descending rank order) of an effective teacher: enthusiastic, an effective communicator, adaptable to change, a lifelong learner, competent, accepting of others, patient, organized, hardworking, and caring.

A New Survey

To begin to address the gaps in the literature, I interviewed 43 early childhood practitioners to obtain their perceptions about the personal characteristics of effective early childhood teachers. These participants represent a wide range of backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and experience. Although some respondents are no longer classroom teachers (they are mentor teachers, supervisors, trainers, and the like), all were early childhood teachers for a number of years.

Because personal characteristics involve feelings and spirit as well as thought, I did not ask survey participants to simply compose a list of characteristics. Instead, I posed questions about what attracted them to the field of early childhood education, the skills they needed to do their jobs, the challenges they faced, and the rewards they reaped. By reflecting on their practice in this way, respondents described the characteristics of effective teachers.

While this is by no means a perfect approach, it provides insight into a construct that is difficult to define and describe. What follows is a qualitative analysis of the responses provided by the 43 participants. I have organized their responses into 12 themes. The content is entirely the respondents'; the analysis is mine.

What Draws Teachers to the Field of Early Childhood Education?

The reasons people choose a profession offer insight into the characteristics they need to do their job well. Common threads link the practitioners interviewed for this article. People do not enter the early childhood education field for monetary reward or occupational glamour.

I had a need to make a difference in children's lives and ensure they got all the opportunities and nurturing they needed and deserved.

The majority of respondents realized at a young age that they wanted to be early childhood teachers. Many, including Renee Hamilton-Jones, who taught preschool for 13 years, reported feeling that "destiny" led them to their career choice. Donna Kirsch, a supervisor of early childhood teachers, termed teaching a *calling:* "I had a need to make a difference in children's lives and ensure they got all the opportunities and nurturing they needed and deserved. It was mostly a calling, much like the ministry—but I don't say that out loud to too many people."

The need to make a difference in children's lives was echoed by nearly every respondent, including longtime kindergarten teacher Joanna Phinney: "I entered the field of early childhood education because I wanted to make a difference in the world. I felt that the place to start was with young children because you can make the biggest difference when children are young."

If you ask early childhood educators who entered the field for idealistic reasons whether they made the right career choice, you'll find few regrets. In the group of 43 surveyed here, no one expressed regret. Here's what two prominent early childhood educators who were once classroom teachers said:

> At a certain point in my career I was offered a position that would have been a promotion, but it was not in early childhood. I debated the decision carefully because I was a single parent of two young children at the time and could have used the additional money that came with the promotion. I chose to stay in early childhood education primarily because I knew my heart was with children's programs. In the end, staying with children's programs was the best decision. Even at the time I did not regret the decision because knowing myself as I do, it was more important for me to believe in the cause than to make money.

—Linda Smith, Executive Director, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

> I can honestly say that I have never, not once, reconsidered my decision to be an early childhood educator. Quite the contrary, I have often marveled at my luck. This profession has never disappointed me. Sometimes it is hard and I am not always successful, but I have an abiding belief in the value of my contributions. Early childhood education has definitely been my "calling," and because of the good match, I have been able to apply my talents and skills in an arena that both needed and valued my insights.

—Linda Espinosa, Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of Missouri–Columbia

What Characteristics Make Early Childhood Teachers Effective?

All the survey participants felt strongly that the early childhood profession has been a good match for their personalities and life goals. What then are the personal characteristics that contributed to making early childhood education a good career match?

1. Passion. Probably more than anything else, teachers report that it's important to have a passion for what you do. In many of the studies referenced in the literature, participants singled out "enthusiasm for children" as a key attribute. For the teachers in

this study, however, something stronger than enthusiasm makes a truly effective teacher; it is closer to *drive*.

Being an early childhood educator is not always easy. There may be physical and financial challenges, for example. But if you feel that what you are doing makes a difference, that sense of accomplishment can sustain and motivate you. John Varga, a Head Start site supervisor, counsels those who do not have a passion for early childhood to find a different career. "This is not a career for someone just looking for a job working with kids because they are cute and it looks like fun. This is a career that must ignite your passion."

2. Perseverance. This is another characteristic frequently cited. Some respondents referred to perseverance as "dedication;" others felt it was "tenacity." Whatever term they used, what participants described is the willingness to fight for one's beliefs, whether related to children's needs or education issues. Teachers have to be willing to be long-term advocates for improving the lives of children and their families. Respondents in this study believe children need and deserve teachers who can overcome bureaucracy and handle red tape.

3. Willingness to take risks. A third related characteristic is the willingness to take risks. Successful educators are willing to shake up the status quo to achieve their goals for children. Great teachers are willing to go against the norm. Taking a risk means not settling for a no answer if a yes will improve the quality of a child's education.

For example, one teacher reports wanting to team teach her preschool class with a self-contained special education program adjacent to her room. Integration of programs had never been done before at her school, and faculty and administration alike looked at the idea with skepticism. To secure administration approval, the teachers had to conduct research, do a parent survey, and bring in outside experts. They held parent meetings to convince both the families of children with disabilities and those of children without disabilities that their children would benefit. After much energy and effort, the program was initiated on a trial basis. Five years later, it is one of the most successful and popular programs at the school (Villa & Colker 2006).

4. Pragmatism. Pragmatism is the flip side of perseverance and willingness to take risks. Pragmatists are willing to compromise. They know which battles are winnable and when to apply their resources in support of children. The important point, respondents felt, is that effective teachers understand that by temporarily settling for small wins, they are still making progress toward their goals.

5. Patience. In line with pragmatism is the characteristic of patience. Respondents cite the need to have patience both when dealing with "the system" and when working with children and families. Not every child learns quickly. Some behaviors can challenge even the most effective teacher. Children need reminder after reminder. Good teachers have a long fuse for exasperation, frustration, and anger. They regard all such challenges as exactly that—challenges. Effective teaching requires patience.

6. Flexibility. This is the sixth characteristic linked by study participants to successful teaching. Indeed, any job in early childhood education demands that you be able to deal well with change and unexpected turns. Whether it's raining outside and you have to cancel outdoor play, or your funding agency has drastically reduced your operating budget, you need to be able to switch gears at a moment's notice and find an alternative that works.

Indeed, any job in early childhood education demands that you be able to deal well with change and unexpected turns.

Sometimes the challenges are both drastic and sudden. Fresh out of college, Ashley Freiberg—one of the study respondents—had been a kindergarten teacher for only a few weeks when she found herself welcoming evacuees from Hurricane Katrina into her Baton Rouge, Louisiana, classroom: "I have 28 kindergarten children in my classroom, and it is my job to work with each of my students and present them with information that will help them to become readers, to master basic math facts, to know about the world around them, and to follow the classroom and school rules. I must do this leaving no child behind, teaching each individual student in the classroom, *without* a classroom aide!" Despite the pressures, Ashley adapted, doing what she had to for each child. Her flexibility exemplifies a vital character trait that respondents felt effective teachers must have.

7. Respect. Surveyed teachers strongly believed that respect for children and families is basic to being a good early childhood teacher. Some identified this characteristic as an "appreciation of diversity." They described it as not only respecting children and families of all backgrounds, but also as maintaining the belief that everyone's life is enhanced by exposure to people of different backgrounds who speak a variety of languages. We know that children's self-concepts flourish in an environment of respect. Good teachers create this environment naturally.

8. Creativity. An eighth characteristic respondents cited was creativity. It takes creativity to teach in a physical environment that is less than ideal or when resources are limited. It takes creativity to teach children from diverse backgrounds who might not approach education in the same way. It takes creativity to teach children with differing learning styles who think and learn in different ways. And most of all, it takes creativity to make learning fun. Creativity is a hallmark of an effective early childhood teacher.

9. Authenticity. This is another frequently cited characteristic of effective teaching. Some respondents referred to this attribute as "self-awareness." Being authentic means knowing who you are and what you stand for. It is what gives you integrity and conviction.

Young children are shrewd judges of character; they know whether a teacher is authentic, and they respond accordingly.

Young children are shrewd judges of character; they know whether a teacher is authentic, and they respond accordingly.

10. Love of learning. Respondents also singled out love of learning. To inspire children with a love of learning, they said, teachers themselves ought to exhibit this characteristic. Teachers who are lifelong learners send children the message that learning is an important part of life. Several participants felt that being an effective teacher involves seeking out knowledge about recent research on teaching. Respondents in this study regard both teaching and learning as dynamic processes.

11. High energy. Though it may have more to do with temperament than disposition, many teachers felt it important that teachers display high energy. Most children respond positively to teachers with high energy levels, valuing their enthusiasm. As Linda Espinosa observed, "The energy it takes to get up every day and work on behalf of young children and families is enormous."

12. Sense of humor. A final vital characteristic of effective teaching pinpointed by respondents in the study was having a sense of humor. Learning should be fun; nothing conveys this message more than a room that is filled with spontaneous laughter. John Varga summarizes the importance of this characteristic in teaching: "All children ask is that we love them and respect them and be willing to laugh when it's funny . . . even when the joke's on us."

Conclusion

Reflecting on their practice, 43 early childhood educators identified characteristics they believe are integral to effective teaching. The resulting 12 characteristics include: (1) passion about children and teaching, (2) perseverance, (3) risk taking, (4) pragmatism, (5) patience, (6) flexibility, (7) respect, (8) creativity, (9) authenticity, (10) love of learning, (11) high energy, and (12) sense of humor.

Interestingly—and not surprisingly—some of the identified characteristics parallel those already identified in the literature (patience, authenticity, and a love of learning, for example.) In other instances, practitioners identified characteristics not typically seen in the literature (perseverance, risk taking, and pragmatism, for example). A future research study could compare the findings; perhaps practitioners have identified trends not yet picked up on by teacher educators.

As acknowledged, data reported in this article were not scientifically collected nor are they meant to represent the view of the entire field. The article does, however, report what selected early childhood educators themselves believe are important characteristics for doing their work effectively. It is the difference between an expert telling a parent how to be a good parent and a parent giving his perspective on parenting. Thus, it is not a question of which is better. Rather, it is an attempt to honor the practitioner's own views about this hard to define but important component of teaching.

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A Foundation for Success

High-quality pre-k programs can narrow achievement gaps and improve students' chances in elementary school.

SARA MEAD

As school districts work to improve student learning and narrow achievement gaps, it's abundantly clear that starting in kindergarten is too late. Many students, particularly low-income and minority children, arrive in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms already far behind their peers. And while this problem is particularly serious for disadvantaged youngsters, plenty of middle-class children—especially boys—also come to school with poor language, literacy, and social-emotional skills.

That's a big challenge for districts seeking to improve student achievement, but there's also good news: High-quality prekindergarten (pre-k) programs that start building children's academic and social skills can help narrow gaps and build a foundation for success in early elementary school.

Thirty-nine states now invest in programs that provide a publicly funded education to 3- and 4-year-old children. Spending on these programs has risen by more than 50 percent—from $2.4 billion in 2001–02 to $3.7 billion in 2006–07—in just six years. This growth far exceeds growth in K-12 spending, and has continued even as states face increasingly tight budgetary environments.

Today, state pre-k programs serve more than 1 million children, including nearly one in four 4-year-olds in the nation. School districts operate programs that directly serve 55 percent of these students, and play a key role in mediating or overseeing community-based programs run by Head Start or private child care providers.

As these programs continue to grow, it is increasingly important that school board members, superintendents, and other building-level and district leaders view providing quality pre-k as a core part of their educational mission.

Some are rising to this challenge and making high-quality pre-k programs central to their plans to improve student achievement. Others, however, know little about pre-k, or view it as tangential to their mission. As states move toward making these programs a standard part of the public education system, just as kindergarten is today, school leaders must understand the role that early education and high-quality pre-k can play in supporting larger improvement agendas.

The Quest for Quality

When it comes to pre-k programs, quality is the operative word. All of the research showing positive effects from pre-k focuses on programs that are of very high quality. Lower-quality programs do not achieve the same results, and research suggests that extremely poor programs actually may be harmful to students.

So, what does quality pre-k entail? As a school leader, how can you ensure that the pre-k programs your district operates or contracts with offer high-quality services?

It's important to understand that quality pre-k programs aren't just about "extending elementary school down" to 4-year-olds. Quality pre-k programs don't look the same as quality elementary school programs. Some activities, goals, and teaching techniques that are appropriate for older children—such as pencil-and-paper assessments, or heavy use of teacher-led whole-group instruction—aren't appropriate with preschool-aged youngsters.

At the same time, quality pre-k is not just child care. Things that are important in quality child care, such as instructors who love children and can provide a warm, nurturing environment, are also important in pre-k. But it's just as critical to have a strong educational focus that can develop children's emerging academic and cognitive skills.

In K-12 education, teacher quality is the most important in-school factor that determines how well your students are learning. That's equally true in pre-k classrooms. Research shows that the quality of interactions between teachers and children in the pre-k classroom is the primary determinant of pre-k quality. It's also the strongest predictor of how much children will learn in pre-k.

What does it mean to have good teacher-child interactions in a pre-k classroom? Researchers at the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) have identified a set of teacher behaviors that are connected to better learning outcomes for children in the pre-k setting. These include: explicit instruction in key skills, sensitive and emotionally warm interactions, responsive feedback, verbal engagement and stimulation, and a classroom setting that is not overly regimented.

These behaviors are what we mean when we talk about high-quality interactions between pre-k teachers and their students.

Most states require pre-k teachers working in public-school-based programs to hold a bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education—although teachers in community-based settings may not be held to the same standards. Research suggests that these qualifications may enhance a teacher's ability to create quality learning environments for children, but they are no guarantee of quality.

The quality of interactions between adults and children in the classroom is a better predictor of student outcomes than teacher education or certification. As a result, school districts must ensure that effective strategies are in place to evaluate the quality of emotional and instructional support that current and prospective pre-k teachers provide to children in the classroom. Districts also must provide ongoing professional development that helps teachers improve the quality of their interactions with children, and adopt research-based behaviors that support student learning.

In some ways, the pre-k field is more advanced than the K-12 field when it comes to thinking about teacher quality, evaluation, and professional development. NCEDL researchers have developed a tool, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which allows trained observers to reliably evaluate the quality of teachers' interactions with children in three areas: instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization.

These evaluations can be used to provide individual feedback and coaching to help teachers improve classroom interactions. Such strategies have the potential to improve pre-k teaching, and serve as models for new ways of thinking about teacher quality and evaluation in elementary and secondary education as well.

Class Size and Curriculum

In addition to talented teachers, high-quality prekindergarten programs also should have small class sizes (no more than 20 students in 4-year-old classrooms, with smaller class sizes for 3-year-olds), and low ratios of children to adults (no more than 10 children for every adult in the classroom).

Most quality pre-k programs have multiple adults in each classroom, either a lead teacher working with one or more trainees or teachers' aides, or a team-teaching approach.

Quality programs also must have a clearly articulated curriculum, whether it's an "off-the-shelf" model such as Opening the World of Learning or Creative Curriculum, or one developed by the district and/or pre-k provider. Which is better? We are not sure, because relatively little research is available on the most effective early education curriculum.

We do know, however, that a pre-k curriculum should address multiple areas that are important to the development of preschool children. These include language, literacy, emerging math skills, and social and emotional development.

Schools often focus on academic skills, but research suggests that the social and emotional development that occurs—learning self-control, sticking with difficult tasks, resolving conflicts verbally rather than by force—is just as important, if not more important, to future school achievement as academic content.

In addition, quality curricula are aligned with state and district standards and expectations for what prekindergarteners will learn and be able to do. Those standards should be aligned with kindergarten curriculum, so that what children learn in pre-k feeds seamlessly into what they will study the following year.

Part of a Broader Vision

To have a lasting impact on learning, pre-k programs must be aligned with equally high-quality kindergarten and early elementary school programs. Research consistently shows that quality pre-k programs have long-term effects in reducing special education placement, grade retention, and school dropout rates. But other academic effects tend to fade out by the end of third grade, because too many pre-k graduates enter public elementary schools that are ill-equipped to build on their pre-k learning gains.

To reap the full benefits of quality pre-k, district leaders must make it the first step in an aligned system of high-quality early education that runs through third grade. This system, with a goal of having all children at or above grade-level proficiency by the end of third grade, requires an aligned curriculum, assessments, professional development, common planning time, and collaboration between teachers across grade levels.

In a recent report, *Principals Lead the Way for PK-3*, the National Association of Elementary School Principals profiled dozens of schools and districts across the country that are using this PK-3 reform approach. An example used was Deep Creek Elementary School, which serves predominantly low-income and minority students in Baltimore County, Md.

New Report Looks at Pre-K in the Future

What do researchers know about early childhood and preschool programs? And what does this mean for the future?

W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, recently completed a comprehensive review of research on pre-k. His conclusions, along with a number of recommendations for school districts, are published in a report released in mid-September by Arizona State University and the University of Colorado.

Among Barnett's conclusions:

- Many preschool programs have been shown to produce positive effects on children's learning and development, but those effects vary in size and persistence by type of program.
- Well-designed programs produce long-term improvements in school success, including higher test scores, lower rates of grade repetition and special education, and higher educational attainment. Some programs also are associated with reduced delinquency and crime in childhood and adulthood.
- The strongest evidence suggests economically disadvantaged children reap long-term benefits from preschool, but students from all other socioeconomic backgrounds benefit as well.
- Current policies for child care, Head Start, and state pre-k do not ensure that most children will attend highly effective pre-k programs. Some have no pre-k options, while others are in educationally weak programs. Middle-income children have the least access, but preschool experiences were found lacking for many in poverty.
- Increasing child care subsidies under current federal and state policies likely will produce mild negative consequences for learning and development, not meaningful improvements. The reason? "The poor quality of child care."
- Increasing investment in effective preschool programs for all children can produce substantial educational, social, and economic benefits. State and local pre-k programs with high standards are the most effective. Public schools, Head Start, and private child care programs have produced similar results when operating with the same resources and standards as part of the same state pre-k program.
- Publicly funded pre-k for all might produce a paradoxical but worthwhile effect. While disadvantaged children benefit (compared to their gains with targeted programs), so do more-advantaged children. This means universal programs may result in higher levels of achievement for the disadvantaged, but a larger achievement gap. Universal programs that substantially increase the enrollment might reduce the gap.

Here are some of the report's recommendations:

- Policymakers should not depart from preschool models that have proven highly effective. These models typically have reasonably small class sizes and well-educated teachers with adequate pay.
- Preschool teachers should receive intensive supervision and coaching, and they should be involved in a continuous improvement process for teaching and learning.
- Programs should regularly assess learning and development to monitor how well children are accomplishing their goals.
- Whole-child development is critical to produce positive effects on children's behavior and later reductions in crime and delinquency. This includes social and emotional development and self-regulation.
- Policies expanding preschool access should give priority to disadvantaged children, who are likely to benefit most. More broadly, preschool policy should be developed in the context of comprehensive public policies and programs that support child development from birth to age 5 and beyond.

For a copy of the full report, visit http://nieer.org/resources/research/PreschoolLastingfects.pdf

In 2001, Deep Creek was one of the county's worst elementary schools, with its third-graders reading at a first-grade level. But today, after a new principal expanded collaboration and professional development for teachers, implemented an aligned reading and math curriculum from pre-k through third grade, and offered summer learning and after-school programs for struggling students, nearly three-quarters of its students read on grade level.

The key to Deep Creek's transformation: a clear vision of high-quality early education, starting in pre-k and continuing through third grade.

Unfortunately, examples like this remain relatively rare, even though the evidence is stark in districts that do not have pre-k programs. Meredith Phillips, a researcher at the University of California at Los Angeles, estimates that as much as half of the achievement gap between black and white students at high school graduation already exists by the time these students enter kindergarten.

Economic research shows that quality pre-k programs return benefits to taxpayers.

Today, new developments in neuroscience and child development research demonstrate that young children can learn far more than we previously realized. Economic research shows that quality pre-k programs return benefits

to taxpayers—such as reductions in crime, special education placements, and high school dropouts—that outweigh their costs. And in today's economy, there is an increasing demand for high-quality child care programs to help support our working families.

So why isn't pre-k integrated into more districts' broader school improvement visions? It's a huge missed opportunity, but it's one that district leaders can correct. Take some time to educate yourself about quality pre-k. Reach across traditional boundaries that separate early childhood from K-12 education, and community-based providers from public schools.

State pre-k expansion has tremendous promise to improve student achievement and help narrow achievement gaps—but only if districts do their part.

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