FirstSchool Symposium

Early School Success

Equity and Access for Diverse Learners

Executive Summary

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www.fpg.unc.edu/~firstschool/resources.cfm

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Early School Success

Equity and Access for Diverse Learners

The FirstSchool Symposium was envisioned as a way to engage people from public schools, universities, and communities in an in-depth discussion on the most effective or promising educational practices for diverse learners from pre-kindergarten through third grade. The symposium focused specifically on the following groups of diverse learners: children with learning difficulties who may not be eligible for special education services, children with disabilities, children who are English language learners, and children from diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural groups. The overarching goal was to use the symposium proceedings and conclusions to inform the development of the FirstSchool framework for educating young children three to eight years of age.

We used an evidence-based practice approach to organize the symposium and develop the four symposium papers. Essentially, this approach recognizes that knowledge can be represented in multiple forms and that there is a need to integrate the best available empirical evidence with the collective wisdom and values of the field and the broader community. As a result, the symposium products and deliberations reflected both what is currently known from research about educational practices for diverse learners and how these practices might be implemented within a local context as a part of FirstSchool.

To ensure that the work was practice-centered, each of the four symposium papers included concrete, relevant examples of the key issues that educators and families encounter in addressing the needs of diverse learners. To integrate the best thinking on these issues from both a national and local perspective, each of the four topics was affiliated with a work group that included a national expert who served as the lead author on the symposium paper, along with representatives of the FPG

FirstSchool Initiative and families and professionals from the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools and the surrounding community. We are grateful to all symposium participants for contributing their time, energy, and wisdom in an effort to improve early education for diverse learners and their families in schools and communities throughout the nation. ■

What is FirstSchool?

FirstSchool is an initiative led by the FPG Child Development Institute (FPG) to develop a framework for integrating the best of early childhood education and elementary education to serve young children ages three to eight. Families, early care and education providers, public schools, FPG, the School of Education at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), and others at UNC-CH and the community have joined together to design FirstSchool.

Why do we need FirstSchool?

FirstSchool boldly calls for a new vision of early school for children ages three to eight. Instead of thinking about pre-kindergarten as an add-on to public school, FirstSchool includes pre-kindergarten as an integral part of the early school years. We hope it will set a new standard for what schools should be to meet the needs of young children. Without leadership and vision, pre-kindergarten may simply become another layer in the K-12 public schools forcing three- and four-year-olds to "fit" into a current school model that often is not appropriate for them.

What makes FirstSchool unique?

Instead of thinking about how to integrate young children into the public education system, FirstSchool turns the question on its head and asks, "How should school meet the needs of young children and their families?" The development and education of children ages three to eight is at the heart of everything we do in the FirstSchool learning community. In this community, every child has a right to a successful, enjoyable, high quality experience that fosters intellectual, physical, emotional, and social well being, and optimizes learning and development. In partnership with families and communities, FirstSchool accepts responsibility for preparing each child for a lifetime of health and learning—in school and beyond.

For additional information on FirstSchool, see
www.firstschool.us

FPG Child Development Institute

Since 1966, research and outreach by FPG has shaped how the nation cares for and educates young children. FPG has a proud history of serving as an objective, knowledgeable force for social change to enhance the lives of children and families. We began with a small group of scientists who had a vision—to conduct research that would make a difference in children's lives, help families, and inform policies. Today we are one of the nation's largest multidisciplinary centers for studying young children and their families.

For additional information on FPG, see
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Kids Like Malik, Carlos, and Kiana*

Culturally Responsive Practice in Culturally and Racially Diverse Schools

Malik, Carlos, and Kiana are young children of color. They are children of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds; children from cities, towns, suburbs across the country; children of working poor families living in economically impoverished urban centers, ghettos, barrios, reservations—communities frequently described as dead end, deprived, and dangerous. They are children who increasingly populate the early childhood classrooms across the country. By 2020, it is projected that nearly 50 percent of all children in the U. S. will be African American and Latino. Forty percent of American children today live in low-income families, with 18 percent of those families below the poverty line, a situation that affects Black and Latino children disproportionately.

As early childhood classrooms become increasingly multiracial, multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic, it is important to understand the influence of culture in children's development. Cultures shape who children are and how they experience the world. Through participation in everyday cultural practices and family traditions, children learn meaning systems, social identity, language, values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and roles intended to develop the competencies appropriate to their culture.

This paper maintains that effective early education for culturally, racially, and economically marginalized children must be grounded in and responsive to children's cultures. Research that shows that child development occurs in the context of culture, and research on culturally responsive pedagogy support the creation of schools in which all culturally and racially diverse children and those in poverty achieve and develop as whole individuals. Early education is not a silver bullet for everything that ails society and its children, but high quality early education programs are an important foundation for improving children's educational outcomes, especially for culturally and racially diverse children and for those who are economically disadvantaged.

The overarching purpose of this paper is to review literature on culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy as this relates to the educational

*This summary has been drawn from a number of sources which are cited in the full paper: Ray, A., & Aytch, L. (2007, May). *Kids Like Malik, Carlos, and Kiana: Culturally responsive practice in culturally and racially diverse schools.* Paper presented at the FPG FirstSchool Symposium: Early School Success: Equity and Access for Diverse Learners, Chapel Hill, NC.

achievement of young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children; to explore issues of teacher preparation for working with children from diverse backgrounds; and to identify areas for future research on these issues. The issues, challenges, and opportunities related to culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy are intended to serve as stimuli for exploring the implications for FirstSchool.

Three major questions addressed in this paper are:

- What empirical evidence suggests that teacher preparation can affect teachers' attitudes and beliefs about cultural and racial differences and influence effective instructional practices with young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children?
- What empirical evidence indicates that culturally responsive teaching practices contribute to improvements in educational outcomes for young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children?
- What additional research needs to be conducted to help develop appropriate and effective early education pedagogy for young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children?

Currently, there is little agreement in the literature on the depth and breadth of knowledge that teachers need to work effectively with specific groups of children, how that knowledge should be mastered, how it should be integrated into teaching, and whether it actually makes a lasting difference in achieving positive child outcomes. Research has shown that early childhood teacher preparation programs may not sufficiently address the complex educational and developmental needs of young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children. Furthermore, higher education teacher training programs have been slow to respond to the need to prepare teachers who can effectively educate diverse students.

There is a dearth of research that systematically follows graduates or in-service teachers into classrooms and assesses the relationship between their professional development on diversity and its effect on student outcomes. Some fundamental interventions that may enhance culturally responsive practice include the following:

- Require that teachers and other school staff visit families in their homes regularly;
- Require and support teachers in developing knowledge of and meaningful relationships with organizations and individuals in the communities in which children live;
- Provide time, resources, and support for ongoing teacher-to-teacher meetings within schools that help teachers critically reflect on their work with children, parents, guardians, families, and communities; and
- Provide ongoing professional development and support tailored to the particular constraints and resources of teachers, schools, children, parents, guardians, and families .

The majority of research on culturally responsive teaching practice has focused on K-12 schools. Three factors thought to be related to the educational achievement of young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children are discussed in relation to research evidence and feasibility for use with three- to eight-year-old children. Those factors are:

- Practices that connect children's culture and experience to the classroom, specifically cooperative learning, culturally responsive curriculum change, and discourse patterns;
- Teachers' personal capacities and attitudes necessary for children's school success; and
- Teachers' use of culturally responsive behavior management styles.

Cooperative learning takes many forms, but generally involves three elements—student interdependence, achievement, and interaction. The goal is to increase understanding and class cohesion through students working together on school-related assignments that cannot be completed without the help of all. Research suggests that cooperative learning not only improves academic achievement, but also teaches social skills and improves classroom climate.

Culturally responsive curriculum reform seeks to (a) build on what children know, think, and value to enrich the classroom curriculum, (b) build on children's strengths; (c) build bridges between what children know and school educational goals; (d) create a caring community grounded in children's cultures and anti-bias values and practices; (e) engage families and guardians in meaningful, respectful, ethical partnerships that

support home and school cultures; and (f) respect and use children's languages and dialects. Curriculum changes that attempt to merely infuse diversity content across the curriculum will not lead to sustained outcomes or significant changes in teacher's attitudes and instructional behaviors. Curriculum change without attention to other factors, especially school and classroom climate, and teacher-child relationships may not have lasting effects

Research on effective teachers of economically disadvantaged and racial minority children, including African American and Latino boys, identify teachers' attitudes, personal capacities, and behaviors as critical factors in children's learning. A single strategy, such as professional development or course work, cannot change teachers' biases, and stereotypes of young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children. A recommended integrated and ongoing process is for teachers to engage in critical reflection. This is best done when a teacher is willing to confront her or his own privilege, power, beliefs, and behavior. This type of inquiry is best done with others willing to engage in similar introspection. Ongoing professional development (PD) tailored to teachers in a particular school that supports reflection, examines research on teacher biases, combines observation in teachers' classrooms by the PD leader, and challenges teachers to examine their practice, expectations, and attitudes is essential.

Teachers' use of culturally grounded behavior management styles with children of color and poor children may be effective in building trusting relationships and learning. Behavior management systems that are well designed and implemented support the development of positive teacher-child relationships. Children are more likely to experience teachers as predictable, responsive, and available if teachers are able to maintain effective behavior management systems within their classrooms which, in turn, contribute to teachers' sense of efficacy and influence. Research suggests that culturally responsive behavior management styles can be learned and taught interculturally teacher-to-teacher and parent-to-teacher.

> Research suggests that cooperative learning not only improves academic achievement, but also teaches social skills and improves classroom climate.

In summary, this paper maintains that culturally responsive teachers and classroom practices may contribute to significantly better educational outcomes for young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children. Despite uneven results and reliance primarily on qualitative methodologies, existing empirical evidence suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching practices may benefit children from diverse groups. Whether results can be generalized to most classrooms and children is unclear and many questions remain unanswered, particularly related to implications for FirstSchool. Research on the following issues may provide greater clarity on the value of culturally responsive pedagogy for young children who may be served in FirstSchool:

- Research that examines parent and community involvement in and attitudes toward culturally responsive early education;
- Research that examines the culture of specific groups of children (e.g., African American, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Navajo, Hmong), parenting practices of families from specific cultures, and how this knowledge may be used to support educational achievement, early schooling, and effective teaching;
- Research that examines the value of culturally responsive early education for significantly improving the educational outcomes of young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children; and
- Research that examines the role of teacher education institutions and professional development in creating teachers who are culturally responsive early educators of young racially, culturally, and economically marginalized children.

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Promising Approaches to Early Intervening in the Primary Grades and Pre-K*

Response to Intervention (RTI) and Recognition and Response (R&R)

This paper explores two promising multi-tier models: *Response to Intervention* (RTI)—a model gaining widespread acceptance throughout the country, designed primarily for students in kindergarten through third grade and beyond, and *Recognition and Response* (R&R)—a new conceptual framework which represents a translation of RTI for use with pre-kindergarten students (three- to five-year-olds). Both RTI and R&R emphasize high quality curriculum and instruction as a foundation for learning for all students, as well as systematic assessment and research-based interventions for those who require additional supports to learn. Both models hold promise for a new approach to early schooling called FirstSchool and its vision of partnering with families and communities to optimize the development of diverse learners three to eight years of age.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the educational practices that are associated with RTI and R&R and to consider how these might be implemented as part of FirstSchool. The next sections summarize the origins and rationale for using multi-tier models for early intervening, the empirical evidence base for RTI, and six key considerations for implementing RTI and R&R in pre-kindergarten and the primary grades in the context of FirstSchool.

Origins and Rationale for Using Multi-Tier Models in Early Education

RTI emphasizes prevention intervention as part of the general education curriculum. Prevention intervention or "early intervening" means that classroom teachers provide instructional supports to students as soon as they show signs of learning difficulties, rather than waiting until children experience repeated failure and are referred for further assessment and possible placement in special education. The origins of RTI can be traced back to a growing movement in the learning disabilities field to shift the focus away from the discrepancy model (demonstrating a discrepancy between academic aptitude and achievement) and toward early intervening combined with high

*This summary has been drawn from a number of sources which are cited in the full paper: Fuchs, L., Buysse, V., & Coleman, M.R. (2007, May). *Promising approaches to early intervening in the primary grades and pre-K: Response to intervention (RTI) and recognition and response (R&R).* Paper presented at the FPG FirstSchool Symposium: Early School Success: Equity and Access for Diverse Learners, Chapel Hill, NC.

> ... there is an emerging body of empirical evidence to support claims that RTI is an effective method for identifying children with learning difficulties and for providing interventions, either to ameliorate or prevent the occurrence of learning difficulties.

quality instruction. The reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) included RTI as one option that schools can use *to identify* students with learning disabilities and allowed local education agencies to use Part B funds to develop these support services [2004; see Sections 614(b)(6) and 613(f)(1)]. Furthermore, a local education agency is allowed to use Part B funds to develop early intervening services for students in kindergarten through grade 12 (with an emphasis on students in kindergarten through grade 3) *who have not been identified* as needing special education or related services, but who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in school [see Section 613(f)(1)].

Although several variations of the model have been proposed, in general, RTI is based on the following components: (a) the use of a research-based core curriculum and effective instruction for all students, (b) standardized prevention interventions which have been validated through research for targeted students who need additional instructional supports, and (c) an integrated assessment or data collection system that includes universal screening and progress monitoring to guide decision making. Some RTI systems also include a problem-solving component to provide a process for identifying and analyzing problems, developing a plan, and evaluating the efficacy of interventions on the basis of data.

The R&R model expands earlier multi-tier approaches for use with three- to five-year-olds in important ways. First, R&R emphasizes the need to support children's learning and development in areas other than social-emotional development (i.e., cognition, language, and academic learning). Second, it incorporates other essential elements of the RTI model not reflected in existing multi-tier approaches in pre-kindergarten. These elements include the link between assessment and research-based interventions, and a collaborative problem-solving process to support data-driven decision-making. R&R consists of four components: (1) screening, assessment, and progress monitoring (recognition); (2) research-based core curriculum, instruction, and interventions (response); (3) an intervention hierarchy; and (4) a collaborative problem-solving process for decision-making.

Empirical Evidence Base for RTI

A research synthesis was conducted on 14 studies that evaluated the use of RTI in kindergarten through third grade. The review included an appraisal of the quality of the research methods as well as descriptions of the characteristics of study participants, the nature of the interventions, the methods of assessing student progress and outcomes, and the effects of the interventions. The findings suggested that there is an emerging body of empirical evidence to support claims that RTI is an effective method for identifying children with learning difficulties and for providing interventions, either to ameliorate or prevent the occurrence of learning difficulties. There was general agreement across studies about the conceptualization of RTI in terms of its key components and tiered interventions; however, there was less agreement about the nature and focus of the specialized interventions, the duration or intensity of the interventions, and the benchmarks used to determine when interventions were effective or if more intensive interventions were needed for students characterized as at-risk for learning disabilities.

Key Considerations for Implementing RTI and R&R in FirstSchool

To implement RTI, schools must make decisions about six components that constitute the process.

1. **Number of prevention tiers.** In RTI, there is growing consensus around a three-tier model, with Tier 1 representing general education, Tier 2 consisting of a research-validated form of instruction, and Tier 3 representing special education. R&R also has been conceptualized as a three-tier model, but, perhaps with even more flexibility than RTI for moving from one tier to the next, depending on children's responsiveness to intervention approaches. It is unlikely that pre-kindergarten children who do not benefit from Tier 2 interventions will meet eligibility criteria for a specific learning disability at Tier 3.
2. **Identifying students for prevention.** Within RTI, current recommendations are that schools use universal screening in conjunction with at least 5 weeks of progress monitoring to determine students' responsiveness to the general education curriculum. With respect to R&R, it should be noted that universal screening is an emerging early childhood practice and additional research is needed to determine which methods of screening and progress monitoring are feasible and most effective within a multi-tier framework for use with three- to five-year-olds. Current early childhood practices emphasize the use of criterion-referenced assessments such as work sampling and curriculum-based assessments in combination with systematic, naturalistic observations by classroom teachers and parents.
3. **Determining what preventive intervention looks like.** RTI is moving toward relying on standard treatment protocols (prescriptive lessons that have been validated through research and are delivered in small groups to address specific reading or math skills) to address academic difficulties. A problem-solving approach is recommended to address obvious behavioral problems. The conceptual framework for R&R includes both research-based interventions for children who require additional instructional supports and a collaborative problem-solving process that includes parents, teachers, and specialists to assist in interpreting assessment results, selecting appropriate interventions, and evaluating their results. Within R&R, it may be most effective to scaffold the learning of young children through interventions that use a balance of explicit and embedded approaches.
4. **Classifying response.** One approach for classifying responsiveness to intervention that is gaining widespread acceptance in RTI is dual discrepancy. Dual discrepancy means that both the level and rate of growth are used to classify a student's response. Students with both a level and rate of growth that is 1 standard deviation below that of peers are deemed "unresponsive" to intervention. This information is used to make decisions about referrals for further assessment within special education. In R&R, response refers both to the ways in which teachers and parents respond to young children with learning difficulties as well as to the ways in which young children react to specific interventions. It is unlikely that terms such as "unresponsive" or "non-re-

sponder" will be used in R&R, largely because of the expected variability in normal development for three- to five-year-olds. Additional research is needed to determine normative levels and rates of growth in this population for general outcome measures.

5. **Multi-disciplinary evaluation.** RTI generally uses an abbreviated multi-disciplinary evaluation focused on students' responsiveness to intervention that includes a process for distinguishing learning disabilities from other types of disabilities. It is unlikely that three- to five-year-olds who exhibit the beginning signs of learning difficulty in the context of R&R will be referred for further evaluation, largely because of different developmental expectations for this age group and because they are less likely to meet special education eligibility criteria. However, involving professionals from a variety of disciplines in the collaborative problem-solving process could serve as a significant source of support to teachers and parents and ensure that children who require special education services get referred in a timely manner.
6. **Special education.** Currently, most discussions about RTI have focused on reforming general education to assist teachers in using a multi-tier system of linking assessment and intervention to meet the needs of all students. However, a revitalization of special education also is needed with an emphasis on providing more intensive Tier 3 interventions that include lower student-teacher ratios, increased instructional time, the use of ongoing progress monitoring, and more flexibility for moving across tiers. Ideally, R&R will be coordinated with existing early intervention and early childhood special education systems that currently focus on children who meet special education eligibility criteria. With more flexibility within these systems, special educators could play a key role as part of an expanded team of professionals and parents to assist in developing, implementing, and evaluating plans for individual children and by providing support to classroom teachers.

Conclusion

In recent years, systematic and comprehensive interventions reflected in multi-tier models have captured the interest and attention of the education field. This paper explored educational practices associated with two promising multi-tier models: RTI and R&R. Currently, much more is known about RTI than R&R, including an emerging body of evidence which suggests that prevention interventions may be effective in identifying, preventing, or ameliorating learning difficulties in school-age students. Current policies that support early intervening, along with mounting empirical evidence on RTI, suggest that multi-tier models may hold promise for children within a First-School context. R&R is consistent with the wisdom and values of the early childhood field with respect to the emphasis on high quality curriculum and instruction and the importance of intervening early using research-based methods; however, additional research is needed to understand how R&R would be implemented in practice and the effects of a multi-tier approach on children's academic learning and development. ■

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*Early School Success for English Language Learners**

A Review of Evidence-Based Instructional Practices for Pre-K to Grade 3

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to describe the current context for the education of young English language learners (ELLs) from three to eight years of age; and to synthesize the state of knowledge on evidence-based practices to support development and academic achievement in young English language learners. The information presented in this paper will serve to initiate discussion about how to promote early school success among ELL children within a new framework for early education called FirstSchool.

Definition of English Language Learners

Children whose home language is not English or who primarily speak a language other than English in the home are considered *English language learners* (ELLs). These children also frequently are described as *linguistic minority students* (LM) or as *linguistically diverse students*.

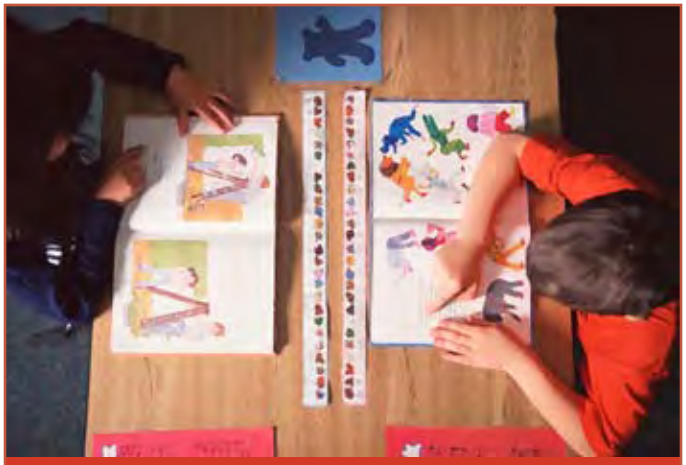
Current Contexts for English Language Learners

The number of families who speak a language other than English in the home has been increasing steadily during the past two decades throughout the U.S., including North Carolina. Young Hispanics are the most likely of all racial and ethnic groups to have limited English proficiency and to live in low-income and linguistically isolated households. These demographic shifts and trends are important for several reasons: (a) the proportion of the population that enters early education programs speaking a language other than English is increasing and is projected to grow at even greater rates; (b) the educational success of these children is critical to the overall progress of our educational system, (c) increased risk factors associated with poorer school performance have been identified within the ELL population—particularly the ELL children from low-SES homes; and (d) specific educational approaches that are effectively implemented during the early years of schooling have the potential to improve the later academic achievement of a growing group of diverse learners.

*This summary has been drawn from a number of sources which are cited in the full paper: Espinosa, L., Castro, D., Crawford, G., & Gillanders, C. (2007, May). *Early school success for English language learners: A review of evidence-based instructional practices for pre-K to grade 3.* Paper presented at the FPG FirstSchool Symposium: Early School Success: Equity and Access for Diverse Learners, Chapel Hill, NC.

Educational Practices to Address the Needs of English Language Learners

This paper reviews the extant research literature on educational practices that are associated with positive outcomes in the following domains of development for English language learners: language and literacy, social and emotional development, cognitive development, and mathematical understanding. The extent to which any or all of the practices identified promote positive long-term outcomes in one or more of the domains listed above for young ELL children is the overarching question of this paper.



... young ELL children need at least 25 percent of their language interactions and instruction in English to develop English proficiency and 25 percent in their home language to develop academic mastery in both languages.

1. **Language of Instruction: English-only or Dual Language?** A review of the literature suggested that young children are capable of learning academic content in two languages; they may benefit cognitively from learning more than one language; transitioning to English too soon may be detrimental to their academic progress in the long run; and the early literacy skills learned in Spanish clearly transfer to learning these skills in English. The children who were taught in English-only classrooms or transitioned to English instruction before they demonstrated well established oral language abilities in their own language and had achieved high levels of English oral fluency did not fare as well as those who had the opportunity to learn through two languages.

Implication for FirstSchool: When a young child who speaks a language other than English at home enrolls in school, it will be important to assess the child's level of language skills in his or her home language as well as in English. If the child's dominant language is not English, then to the maximum extent possible, some instruction, early literacy activities, and language learning opportunities should be provided in the home language as well as in English.

2. **More or Less Home Language (Spanish) in Early Childhood?** An examination of the results across all available research on this topic suggests that young ELL children need at least 25 percent of their language interactions and instruction in English to develop English proficiency and 25 percent in their home language to develop academic mastery in both languages. It is difficult to specify with any precision how much of the remaining time should be devoted to each language.

Implications for FirstSchool: Attention should be given to the quality and quantity of language interactions that ELL children experience in early education settings. Whenever possible, qualified teachers and staff members who are fluent in the home language(s) of the children served should be recruited and hired by FirstSchool. Guidance should be provided on who will speak in the child's home language, when it will be used, and for which instructional goals.

3. **English-plus-Spanish Approaches.** English-plus-Spanish (EPS) refers to a wide range of formal and informal approaches to using both English and Spanish in the classroom. An example of an informal approach would be classrooms in which instruction is primarily in English, but teachers routinely use Spanish to clarify points or ask questions when the student's knowledge of English is too limited for the exchange. Students also use varying amounts of both English and Spanish in their own conversations in the classrooms. Transitional bilingual education is an example of a common formal approach to EPS education.

This research emphasizes the danger of introducing English too early because it may lead to loss of the child's home language. Combining this perspective with the evidence that two languages can benefit young children suggests that educators should find ways to support the development of the home language for very young ELL children enrolled in English-only learning environments.

Implications for FirstSchool: The available evidence supports an English-plus-Spanish approach to the early education of ELL children who are native Spanish speakers. There is compelling research to show that ELL children need ongoing support and some instruction in their home language. Whether this support comes in the form of an EPS approach or an approach that involves a 50–50 split between English and Spanish instruction cannot be determined from the research at this time. However, all early education programs should work to ensure that young children do not experience loss of their home language once English is introduced.

4. **Implementing a Culturally Responsive Curriculum.** A culturally responsive approach includes the students' personal histories, languages, early experiences, and values in classroom activities and instruction.

Implications for FirstSchool: Theoretically and empirically, there is some evidence to suggest that ELL children benefit when schools systematically build connections to children's home language, literacy, and culture. Knowledge of cultural values and norms, the aspirations that parents have for their children, and how all of this is translated into childrearing practices would assist the program staff in designing instructional activities that capitalize on and extend the strengths and abilities of ELL children.

5. **Explicit Teaching of Literacy Skills and Vocabulary.** High quality instruction targeting all students also benefits ELL students. As do their English-speaking peers, ELL students benefit from active engagement; opportunities to review, practice, and apply new information in a variety of contexts; and direct instruction on certain aspects of literacy. The evidence also underscores the need to provide special attention to English vocabulary and English oral language development and instructional accommodations to help ELLs keep pace with their English-speaking peers.

Implications for FirstSchool: The primary requirement for all staff employed by FirstSchool is that they be highly qualified early childhood educators. They need knowledge of early childhood pedagogy and a wide range of appropriate instructional methods. These methods include how to individualize instruction based on student assessment and how to effectively work with diverse families. In addition, those who work with ELL students need to know how to make adaptations for children who are adding the English language to their home language.

> ... children benefit when schools systematically build connections to children's home language, literacy, and culture.

Directions for Future Research

There is a clear need for additional high quality research on how much home language support is required for ELL students and for how long; which specific instructional practices are most effective for which ELL students; which language and literacy skills transfer between Spanish and English and how best to facilitate that transfer; how to integrate home culture and practices into the curriculum; and how to most effectively engage and communicate with families that speak little or no English. However, the available evidence suggests that a number of practices such as the strategic use of the home language in early education are effective in promoting English acquisition, reading fluency, and school achievement in ELL students. ■

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Promising Practices to Support Effective Early Childhood Inclusion for Pre-K to Grade 3*

In this paper we discuss the *Building Blocks* model of inclusion. This model provides a continuum of evidence-based practices designed to support the social participation and academic engagement of the child with special needs in the general education classroom. The components of the *Building Blocks* model are traditionally arranged in a pyramid-like fashion with less intensive supports (e.g., quality of the classroom environment) forming the foundation of the model, and more time and resource-intensive strategies (e.g., child-focused instruction) at the top of the pyramid. This arrangement provides a strategy to individualize and match services to the needs of the child. Although this model was originally designed for preschoolers with special needs, we have adapted and extended it for use with early, elementary-aged children. Using this model as a guide for how inclusive services can work within the context of FirstSchool provides a common framework from which discussion can take place to advance the mission and goals of the FirstSchool initiative.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the *Building Blocks* model of inclusion and its relevance to FirstSchool. Specifically, we will discuss the origins of the model, the principles of FirstSchool that align with the model, and the essential components of the model that allow inclusion to work. The sections of this executive summary will briefly address each of these areas.

Origins and Rationale for the Building Blocks Model of Inclusion

It is difficult to discuss the origins of *Building Blocks* without briefly discussing the origins of inclusive education in this country. The inclusion of young children with special needs in early childhood settings extends back to the early 1970s and many efforts, such as the passage of IDEA, have been directed toward the placement of children in general education environments. However, the *Building Blocks* model goes beyond the physical placement of children with special needs in classrooms with their typically developing peers. It extends the definition of inclusion to incorporate additional features that should be considered to deem the inclusive experience successful for a particular child. Those features are:

- **Meaningful participation in classroom learning experiences.** The child with special needs should be actively and routinely engaged in classroom activities. However, the extent of that

*This summary has been drawn from a number of sources which are cited in the full paper: Odom., S. L., Boyd, B., & Buysse, V. (2007, May). *Promising practices to support effective early childhood inclusion for pre-K to grade 3.* Paper presented at the FPG FirstSchool Symposium: Early School Success: Equity and Access for Diverse Learners, Chapel Hill, NC.

engagement may vary depending upon the abilities and needs of the child. In addition, teacher and peer supports may be needed to foster child participation.

- **Membership and belonging in the classroom.** The child with special needs should be considered by the classroom teacher and his or her peers as a "full-fledged" member of the classroom. It is important that the success of the child be considered the responsibility of the entire collaborative team of adults who work together to support the needs of the child.
- **Development of positive social relationships with classroom peers.** Social acceptance is as important a component of successful inclusion as academic learning and engagement. The child with special needs should have the supports in place to help establish and maintain relationships and friendships with peers.

These features are based on empirical evidence that demonstrate their importance. Recent studies of early childhood quality have found inclusive settings to be of similar or superior quality compared to general early childhood education. Furthermore, typically developing children in inclusive classrooms are not negatively affected by participating in classes with children with disabilities. These three features of the *Building Blocks* model will help to guide classroom practices and directly align them with the principles of FirstSchool.

The focus on high quality practices and instruction should foster the academic and learning experiences of all children, including those with special needs.

Principles of FirstSchool that Align with the Building Blocks Model

FirstSchool has several principles that underlie the success of inclusion for children with disabilities. An emphasis on *high quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood education* will serve as a major foundation for successful inclusion. The focus on high quality practices and instruction should foster the academic and learning experiences of all children, including those with special needs. *Collaboration* among professionals that is built on communication, mutual respect, common vision, adequate time for planning and resources, training, and administrative support will provide the necessary and sometimes invisible (if one were to only look in the classroom) infrastructure necessary for inclusion. Collaboration among FirstSchool general and special education teachers and related service providers should foster the development of appropriate and consistent goals and objectives for the child that can be addressed in multiple settings. *Continuity* of the well articulated FirstSchool principles across the early school years will be a major asset. Transition from preschool to elementary school has always been a major hurdle for children with disabilities. A cohesive model of schooling that is continuous from pre-K to grade 3 will allow systematic planning for the scope of schooling experiences within the same system and literally in the same school building. Such continuity may help to foster the child's classroom membership and lasting friendships with peers.

We now turn our discussion to the actual components that comprise the *Building Blocks* model.

Essential Components of the Building Blocks Model

The *Building Blocks* model is arranged in a pyramid-like fashion with each element serving as an essential "block" for successful inclusion.

1. **High-quality early childhood education.** The foundation for preschool inclusion is that instruction and services take place in a high quality environment. Most children will become engaged in and benefit from such a high quality learning setting. The dimensions of the classroom and learning environment will change across the school years, with classes for three-year-olds obviously looking quite different from classes for third graders. However, several features that may be consistent across the school years are: (a) responsiveness and predictability of the classroom environment, (b) frequent and multiple opportunities for learning, (c) match between classroom activities and child's level of understanding, (d) engaging social interactions with teachers and peers, (e) need for a safe environment, and (f) balance between child and teacher direction and instruction. For some children, however, teachers may need to make additional but slight modifications to the classroom environment.

2. **Curriculum modifications.** The second tier of this *Building Blocks* model is curriculum modifications. Some children may not actively participate in some (or all) activities in the class, although with slight adjustments by the teacher, they may become active participants. A curriculum modification is a change in an activity, routine, material, or physical environment that leads to children's increased participation. They are "easy-to-implement" strategies that do not require teachers to make great changes in their activities or interactions with children, but that may have considerable effects on children. For some children with special needs, curriculum modifications may not promote the degree of engagement necessary for learning and development, and a more intensive level of support may be needed.

3. **Embedded learning opportunities (ELO).** The third block in this model is embedded learning opportunities. ELOs are planned instructional opportunities that are embedded, as naturally as possible, into an ongoing classroom activity or routine. For children with identified disabilities and IEPs, as well as other children who may need more support than curriculum modifications, teachers will need to design an individualized learning program. The task of embedding learning opportunities requires more specific and individualized planning than occurs in the use of curriculum modifications. The

teacher may have to examine his or her schedule of classroom activities to decide when to purposefully embed the learning objective. Some children may require more direct, explicit instruction to learn goals and objectives.

4. **Child-focused instructional strategies (CFIS).** The learning needs of some children may require more instructional support than can be provided through ELO. For those children, child-focused instructional strategies (CFIS) may be necessary. CFIS are specific techniques and intervention approaches that can be used to teach important skills to children in the classroom who may require extra instruction. A variety of instructional approaches fit under the CFIS umbrella such as individualized, adult-directed instruction, child self-management strategies, and peer-mediated instructional approaches. It must be noted that collaboration among service providers is essential to make the components of *Building Blocks* work. Special education teachers and consultants, related service providers such as speech or physical therapists, and classroom teachers must all see as one of their roles the provision of an effective learning program for children with disabilities (and in fact for all children in the classroom).

... collaboration among service providers is essential to make the components of *Building Blocks* work.

Conclusion

The successful inclusion of children with special needs is a primary emphasis of FirstSchool. The *Building Blocks* model is an evidence-based approach that incorporates a continuum of essential components designed to facilitate the child's academic learning and social engagement. The components of *Building Blocks* are aligned with the principles, values, and ideas of the FirstSchool project. Embedding the components of *Building Blocks* into FirstSchool should provide children with special needs the opportunity for meaningful participation, foster their sense of classroom belonging, and promote social acceptance and friendship with peers. The success of these strategies, and in fact the whole approach, however, is predicated on a belief that inclusion of children with special needs is valued and that such inclusion requires collaboration from all individuals involved in the child's education. ■

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