First School

Culture of Caring

Nurture Positive Relationships

Strengthen Self-Efficacy & Racial/Cultural Identity

Develop the Whole Child

Culture of Competence

Promote Peer Interactions

Develop Self-Regulation

Encourage Independence

Prioritize Communication

Culture of Excellence

Balance Teaching Approaches

Integrate & Balance Curriculum

Build Higher Order Thinking

At FirstSchool, we have organized ten research-based instructional practices into a framework designed to foster classroom cultures of **caring**, **competence**, and **excellence.** Within each of these cultures are instructional strategies that have been identified as highly beneficial for African American, Latino, and low-income children in PreK-3 environments.

FirstSchool:
Instructional Practices Framework

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Culture of Caring

Nurture Positive Relationships

Research identifies the need for relatedness as one of three basic human needs (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to others and to experience a sense of belonging to a larger community. Relatedness enables children to interact effectively with others, to give and accept responsibility, to cooperate, to have compassion, to show respect— all abilities that enable them to function as productive members of a community.

Unfortunately in today's educational climate, little attention is given to providing time and attention to this critical aspect of teaching and learning. Research however tells us that the time and effort teachers put into creating a classroom community centered on caring and mutual respect pay dividends far beyond the initial investment (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

Strengthen Self-Efficacy & Positive Racial Identity

Research indicates that teachers often have low expectations and are more critical of children of color than of their white peers (Wang, Oates, Weishew, 1995). This is particularly significant in PreK-3rd grade, because research suggests patterns of engagement and achievement formed during the first three years of school impact children's long-term academic trajectories (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Since academic trajectories tend to be stable and difficult to change over the course of their schooling (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1993), it is critical that a child experience early success and develop a positive self-concept and a strong sense of self-efficacy.

A child's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation impacts every aspect of learning. Children with a strong sense of self-efficacy recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments, willingly tackle challenging problems, develop deeper interest in the undertakings in which they participate, and form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests (Bandura, 1994). African American, Latino and children who come from poverty need to know that school is a place where they belong, and can succeed.

Develop the Whole Child

All domains of development are important and interrelated thus it is essential that classrooms for young children emphasize not only cognitive development, but social, emotional and physical development as well. From birth and throughout the lifetime, movement and learning are interconnected, and physical activity is one of the best ways to stimulate the brain and learning (Jensen, 1998; Kempermann, Kuhn, & Gage, 1997; Hannaford, 1995). Brain research also suggests that physical activity prior to class and during class, increases students' ability to process and retain new material (Kubesch, et al., 2009; Ratey, 2008). Movement has been shown to reduce stress, lift one's mood, fight memory loss, sharpen intellect, and improve the ability to focus and concentrate.

It is far too prevalent in classrooms to find policy and practice that sacrifices time outdoors and time in gross motor activity in a sadly mistaken notion that it is a waste of time.

A Culture of Competence

Support Independence

Children have a strong need to feel control over themselves and their lives. Teachers need to understand that becoming autonomous is a critical developmental process that must be supported within the classroom. Research has shown that children who do not develop autonomy are more likely to be dependent upon adults and excessively influenced by their peers (Gartrell, 1995; Erikson, 1950). Therefore, teachers, especially teachers of young children, should intentionally create opportunities for children to become self-reliant. In doing so, they are helping to increase students' self-confidence along with improving their social, cognitive, and moral development (Erikson, 1950; Fordham & Anderson, 1992; Maxim, 1997; Morrison, 1997; DeVries & Zan, 1995).

Promote Self-regulation

Teachers who support children's autonomy not only provide a climate in which children are respected by adults but also gives them the necessary skills and practice to develop crucial self-regulation skills. Blair

and Diamond (2008) define self-regulation as the volitional behavioral and cognitive processes through which people maintain levels of motivational, cognitive, and emotional arousal that facilitate positive adaptation and adjustment, as reflected in high levels of productivity and achievement as well as positive relationships and a positive sense of self. That is, it is what allows young children to remain focused and persistent as they meet daily challenges in a rigorous classroom.

Encourage Peer Interactions

A culture of competence requires teachers to help their students develop the ability to work with their peers toward common goals. According to Johnson (1981), "Experiences with peers are not a superficial luxury to be enjoyed during lunch and after school. Constructive student-student relationships are a necessity for maximal achievement, socialization, and healthy development"(p. 5). Results from over 600 research studies that have investigated learning in cooperative, competitive, and individualist goal structures have indicated students learn more, are more highly motivated to learn, enjoy learning more, feel more positive towards the subject being studied, have increased positive regard for their teachers, and are more accepting of one another when they work together with peers as opposed to working competitively or individually (Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

Prioritize Communication

No one would debate that being capable of expressing one's thoughts and ideas is a critical skill for academic and social success, yet typical FirstSchool data indicates that teachers generally spend 75-90 % of instructional time engaged in "teacher talk" while 3-4 % of the day is spent engaging students in meaningful dialogue.

A classroom emphasis on oral language development has been identified as one of the premier instructional strategies for ensuring the success of children, especially those in low socioeconomic communities (Mason & Galloway, 2012). While children often come to school with strong oral language, their development is interrupted, rather than promoted, by teacher dominance. As Mason & Galloway (2012) point out, "When seen from a strength-based perspective, these children are competent communicators in their families and in their communities where language is a medium to form social connections and to communicate needs, wants, and hopes." (p.30) Therefore, it is critical that teachers embrace dialect and home language, recognizing them as assets and building upon them to promote learning and development through speaking.

A Culture of Excellence

Balance Teaching Approaches

Balanced teaching requires teachers to become adept at a number of pedagogical approaches, choosing the appropriate approach to instruction based on student need and content. At FirstSchool, we differentiate between three main teaching approaches: didactic instruction, scaffolding, and reflection. Didactic teaching allows teachers to communicate new and review information in the most efficient manner. Scaffolded instruction helps students to connect to prior knowledge and deepen their understanding of both new knowledge, and the facts and issues to which it connects. It provides teachers with constant formative assessment of children's abilities in both content and process of learning and it actively engages children. Reflection gives students the opportunity to express their own thought processes. In doing so, children learn to self-assess and more thoughtfully support the positions they take.

Balance and Integrate Curriculum

Teachers assist students in creating complicated knowledge schemas by effectively integrating curricula. Integrating across the curriculum provides two key benefits. First it allows teachers to communicate and teach more material and facilitate smoother connections between various topics. Second, when students utilize reading and math skills to explore science and social studies topics, they see first-hand the ways that knowledge connects rather than experiencing learning as a series of discrete exercises with no end beyond the learning of an isolated skill.

Build Higher Order Thinking Skills

In the schools in which we work, much like most that are populated principally by minority and low-income students, the achievement gap has been addressed through a remediation model where basic skills are nearly the sole focus. We believe that although basic skills instruction is a critical component of instruction (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004), focusing only on isolated skills will not yield excellence. Another means of approaching the achievement gap is through the provision of differentiated, enriched instruction (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). Schools using this approach rely on open-ended activities that promote critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, and meta-cognitive skills while providing children with the opportunity to apply, synthesize, and extend the knowledge they have gained during basic skill instruction.

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards provides hope for a shift toward instruction on not just **what** to think but **how** to think. Such pedagogical changes require deep levels of change, and with intentionality, time, effort, supportive leadership, data, and collaboration, all classrooms can become places where quality instruction is the everyday experience for all learners.

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