

First School

UNITING THE BEST OF EARLY CHILDHOOD,
ELEMENTARY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Number Seven

Issues in PreK-3rd Education



A FirstSchool Framework for Curriculum and Instruction

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FirstSchool

FirstSchool is a pre-K–grade 3 initiative led by FPG and the UNC-CH School of Education to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse population. FirstSchool unites the best of early childhood, elementary, and special education.

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FirstSchool is part of a national PreK–3rd movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different projects use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools. For more resources on this movement, please visit the Foundation for Child Development’s website.

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The School of Education was established at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1885 and is organized under four academic areas: teaching and learning; educational leadership; human development and psychological studies; and culture, curriculum and change.

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Introduction

FirstSchool’s orientation to curriculum is mindful of the fact that a wide range of curricula successfully support children’s learning in pre-kindergarten and elementary classrooms. Rather than develop a new curriculum or advocate for specific curricula, FirstSchool offers a framework to assist schools and teachers as they work within their own set of circumstances to study and improve curriculum content and coherence across children’s early educational experiences. Consistent with the values, beliefs and goals of FirstSchool, the aim of this curriculum framework is to ensure an *effective*, *essential*, and *ethical* curriculum for all children in prekindergarten through third grade.

We define...

- an *effective* curriculum as a dynamic coordinated continuum where physical environments, instructional approaches, learning and behavioral expectations and content change gradually and seamlessly in response to children’s learning needs and developmental competencies.
- an *essential* curriculum as one dedicated to helping all children attain knowledge and skills necessary to their active participation in society, including the physical strength and coordination to engage in regular activity and those social and communicative skills required to develop and maintain positive relationships with adults and peers.
- an *ethical* curriculum as one based on ongoing study of children’s interests and learning processes and respectful and reciprocal exchanges with children’s families and other stakeholders.

Challenges and Commitments

The foremost guiding principle of our concept of the FirstSchool community is that **all children can and will learn when educational communities are ready for them**. However, despite notable efforts, the school achievement gap continues to grow between minority and majority as well as between low-income and higher-income children.¹ The combination of minority group status and poverty continues to disadvantage children in terms of school achievement.^{2,3} The chronic nature of this relationship underscores FirstSchool's greatest challenge—to move from a mind set of accepting the achievement gap in populations of vulnerable children to a *commitment that makes explicit the responsibility of education professionals to broaden their repertoires and hone their skills to create schools and classrooms in which all children maximize their potential*.

A second principle associated with our concept of the FirstSchool community is that **children learn best within a coordinated continuum of learning goals and experiences**. In spite of increased efforts to better align the fields of early and elementary education, scholars, teachers, parents and children have all noted the “exceptional variability in the nature and quality of learning experiences offered to children in the early grades,”⁴ with a significant disjunction as they transition through grade levels often characterized by a more academic curriculum, different teaching styles, less flexible classroom organization and rules, and decreased parent involvement.⁵ For many, curricula and pedagogical differences are seen as inevitable and necessary challenges for children as they advance through grade levels. Others point to a decline in the “developmental appropriateness” of classrooms as defined by early childhood educators across the kindergarten to third grade span;⁶ and a general lack of support for children’s learning of subject matter content in pre-school and kindergarten settings.⁷ FirstSchool’s response to this historic professional divide is to *propose a negotiated curriculum that supports child development **and***

*learning, including subject-matter knowledge, skills **and** dispositions*.

The third principle guiding FirstSchool’s interpretation of curriculum and instruction is a **commitment to optimizing the benefits of early education for a more diverse population of children than has traditionally been served**. Given the profound effect of early education on children’s long term success in school,^{8,9} this is embedded within a larger pedagogical orientation to social justice. This pedagogical orientation brings with it another challenge: to insure that curriculum continuity is not interpreted as ‘sameness’ within or across grade levels. Contemporary classrooms include children with special needs as well as those with multiple and diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.¹⁰ The challenge, in designing an inclusive curriculum, is to insure ongoing attention to children’s individual and familial differences as well as their changing developmental status and learning potentials. With an asset orientation to classroom diversity, curriculum decisions will be based on ongoing and authentic assessment as it supports seamless and purposeful planning for a wide range of diverse learners. To this end, FirstSchool’s interpretation of a coordinated continuum is *not* focused on overly specific and/or prescriptive content and practices; rather, *it highlights the linked processes of observation, assessment, negotiation and planning as essential to a successful and inclusive curriculum continuum*.

FirstSchool’s position is that these three challenges are central to the mission of public schools in a pluralistic democratic society. This brief highlights FirstSchool’s commitment to these challenges in the form of a framework to improve and integrate curriculum for young children in pre-kindergarten through third grade. The following framework derives broadly from fundamental assumptions about human nature and social structures as well as, more narrowly, the study of effective educational practices and pedagogical principles.

FirstSchool Framework: Criteria and Inquiry Questions

What sort of curriculum is suitable for a diverse population of children over a span of time characterized by extraordinary growth and development? The following criteria and inquiry questions provide a framework for selecting, applying and aligning curricula and instructional practices:

1. **A successful curriculum supports and utilizes the critical role of transitions in creating a seamless approach to children’s learning.** Children experience multiple transitions in their first years of school, including those between community-based child-care providers and pre-school programs, homes and schools, and from classroom to classroom. In order to succeed in school, children must have access to the “culture of schooling”¹¹ and teachers need access to information about children’s lives in and out of the classroom.¹² A central critique of early childhood approaches is that children are not being adequately prepared for the demands of elementary classrooms. Recent research provides some support for this concern, such that even effective approaches to learning acquired in one setting may, when children attempt to replicate them in subsequent settings, be associated with deficit views of the child, her behavior, and/or her learning aptitude.^{13, 14} However, an equally valid interpretation of these data is that the settings and expectations typical of elementary school place inappropriate demands on children, including those previously perceived as competent learners. An ethical and coherent curriculum does not set up children to fail. A successful continuous curriculum will create bridges across each of these settings. **Questions to ask:**

- *Do schools work with communities to insure a smooth and informed transition of children into their first schooling experience, including the development of relationships with community child care providers, health professionals and families?*
- *Do educators work with families to develop the relationships essential to ongoing communication about the child as he/she moves between home and school?*
- *How is educators’ time managed to indicate that planning and communication are a priority, including insuring time for regular conversation between teachers and families, interdisciplinary staff, and colleagues from the same and different age/grade levels?*
- *What is in place to help all children make smooth transitions from one classroom/grade level to another? Considerations include academic continuity and social and emotional adjustment to changes in expectations, personalities, and environment.*
- *Are teachers working regularly with each other across grade levels to coordinate their curriculum plans and instructional strategies to maximize children’s school success?*

2. **A successful curriculum for young children capitalizes on their powerful drive to learn and be competent.** The National Research Council’s review of research on early childhood education conveyed its conclusion in the title: all children are *Eager to Learn*.¹⁵ Given this

disposition, the issue of school readiness shifts from an emphasis on the child's status as suggested by standardized screening to one of the school's preparedness to support and inspire children's learning. A curriculum that builds on children's dispositions to learn and to feel competent will include multiple opportunities for meaningful feedback on learning outcomes as opposed to primarily performance oriented feedback. Curriculum projects are planned with a variety of expectations and avenues of exploration, insuring the possibility of success for all children. Such a curriculum conveys authentic and explicit confidence in children's learning potential. **Questions to ask:**

- *How might children's curiosities be utilized in this curriculum?*
- *Are behavior problems linked to boredom with a too-easy or remote curriculum?*
- *Could curriculum goals be translated into a "need to know" that is meaningful to children?*

3. **A successful curriculum utilizes and nurtures positive relationships between children and their teachers.** A corpus of research suggests that the development of positive relationships between a teacher and child is foundational to all work with young children.^{16, 17} A positive relationship between the teacher and the child supports a child's ability to make friends, freely explore the environment, and maximize learning. Indeed, a growing body of research points to the consequences for children who do **not** have close and/or respectful relationships with their teachers.^{18, 19} This finding is not limited to early childhood settings. Research found teacher-child relationships characterized by fairness, caring and availability were the most important features of a learning climate for elementary age African-American and Latino children.²⁰

Questions to ask:

- *What evidence is there that children's relationships with teachers are positive?*
- *Are particular children singled out for attention, whether positive or negative?*
- *What instructional strategies might enhance the teacher-child relationship?*

4. **A successful curriculum capitalizes on the powerful potential of children's relationships with each other to support their social, intellectual, and academic achievement.** Classrooms typically offer a great deal in terms of group dynamics, and teachers have long been advised to take advantage of that situation.²¹ Theory and research point to the critical role of children's peer relations to their overall development as well as to the learning of academic content. Children's pursuit of new skills and conceptual understanding is enhanced when they are allowed to take



advantage of the skills and knowledge of their more capable peers and when they feel safe, welcome and included in a classroom of accepting and friendly classmates.²² A curriculum that utilizes and promotes positive peer relations will help children go beyond tolerance to an appreciation of their diversity within and outside the classroom.

Questions to ask:

- *Does teacher knowledge of children’s relationships influence decision making regarding curriculum goals and instructional strategies? Are children encouraged to develop friendships and utilize peer relationships during instructional activities?*
- *Are children with special needs included in the classroom peer culture?*
- *What do children know and appreciate about each other’s lives outside the classroom?*

5. A successful curriculum is intellectually challenging and personally meaningful.

All children should have access to an ambitious curriculum that encourages them to maximize their potential in all developmental and content areas. Task engagement and learning expand exponentially when curriculum expectations build upon prior knowledge and learning activities lead children in new and desirable and sometimes unexpected directions. There are many examples of children’s long-term interests in project work and their abilities to hypothesize, test, generalize, and revise prior understandings in the face of new discoveries.²³ Early childhood research supports the value of hands-on and intellectually engaging activities that are responsive to children’s questions and connected to areas of importance in the classroom, family, or community.²⁴

Questions to ask:

- *Do curriculum goals and materials build upon what children already know and know how to do?*
- *Are existing curriculum materials open to expansion or refinement?*
- *How are real-life problems used to support and enhance the learning and practice of subject matter content?*

6. A successful curriculum and pedagogy support the co-construction of knowledge by children, teachers, and families.

Research shows that the same learning principles valued by early childhood educators—actively constructing knowledge through hands-on activities, participation in decision-making, and collaborations with peers and teachers—can be equally effective in the primary grades.^{25, 26} Such a curriculum will utilize instructional practices that help children explore problems, move them to developing strategies to address those problems, and then help them to form shared concepts that are generalizable to new situations. In schools that function as active learning communities, children and adults work separately and together on projects of importance and interest. Collaborative relationships with children’s families contribute to the design of a more culturally responsive curriculum through the negotiation of learning goals and teaching strategies as well as learning experiences that utilize culturally familiar routines and materials. When families are invited to share

their own perspectives on children's learning, parents and teachers alike gain insights into the variety of children's learning opportunities outside the classroom. This orientation to curriculum and pedagogy also contributes to children's identity development through active support for home cultures and languages.²⁷

Questions to ask:

- *Are parents actively involved in discussions of curriculum choice and instructional practices?*
- *Are culturally relevant alternative interpretations of subject areas and learning styles included in curriculum planning and instructional strategies?*
- *Are culturally-relevant tools and materials utilized in learning activities?*



7. A successful curriculum and associated instructional strategies are characterized by intentionality. First School education professionals know why they are doing what they are doing. They engage in purposeful and sustained attention to children's learning and development.^{28, 29} Teachers' decision-making between direct instruction and more child-initiated types of learning experiences will no longer represent a choice between developmentally appropriate versus traditional forms of instruction. Rather, these choices will represent teachers' application of theoretical principles to knowledge about specific children working within particular contexts.

Recent research on child outcomes associated with early childhood curriculum models provides further support for the importance of purposeful attention to specific academic content.³⁰ When schools align teaching philosophy, curriculum development, and assessment practices across the pre-kindergarten and primary grades, children's learning and development are the direct beneficiaries.^{31, 32, 33, 34}

Such alignment includes attention to all areas of children's development, including social-emotional, intellectual, language and physical development. **This knowledge is utilized routinely to inform curriculum goals and planning.** A successful curriculum also attends systematically and strategically to children's early learning styles as well as the content areas of literacy, mathematics, technology, science, social studies, and technology and the expressive arts. **Questions to ask:**

- *Can teachers identify the goals and related activities associated with child development?*

- *Can teachers and others articulate specific goals and activities as they promote children's continued learning of pre-academic and academic subject matter?*
- *How do teachers share and coordinate their curriculum goals and instructional practices with each other and with children's families?*
- *What supports are available to help teachers negotiate their diverse perspectives on appropriate curriculum and instructional strategies?*

8. A successful pedagogy is both child-regulated and teacher guided.³⁵ Research on children's capacities to engage in deep exploration of complex topics challenges early childhood curriculum models that limit the teacher's role to the provision of safe materials in a predictable environment.^{36, 37} Approaches to teaching and learning must be wide-ranging and responsive to individual needs. Children benefit from activities that challenge them to work at the edge of their developing capacities, as well as ample opportunities to practice newly acquired skills and develop the disposition to persist. But the presence of a thoughtful and knowledgeable teacher to guide children through these experiences is also essential. This orientation to curriculum reflects an image of children both as capable of constructing their own knowledge and understanding and able to benefit from instruction that is provided by adults and more competent peers. **Questions to ask:**

- *Which processes and content are best learned through systematic, guided instruction?*
- *Which processes and content are best approached through discourse and inquiry?*

9. A successful pedagogy utilizes assessment to inform curriculum planning and instructional practices. Research on effective teaching strategies underscores the importance of on-going, authentic and culturally sensitive assessment of children's skills and abilities to the design and implementation of an appropriately challenging and engaging curriculum. Assessment in this view will emphasize children's learning as well as what they are about to learn; and will play a central role in decision-making associated with curriculum planning, including the use of small and large-group formats, short- and long-term projects, and integrated as well as single-subject projects and learning experiences. Ethical assessment creates rather than limits educational opportunities for children. **Questions to ask:**

- *What mechanisms are in place to insure ongoing monitoring of children's development and learning progress?*
- *Are assessment strategies oriented to making positive rather than punitive decisions about children's educational opportunities?*
- *Are multiple perspectives on children utilized in the assessment process?*

10. A successful pedagogy nurtures a school-wide community of learners. Theories of adult learning support recent examples of classrooms that function as communities practice. When teaching is interpreted as a profession of inquiry, interpretations

of curriculum serve as contexts for teachers to teach. Effective teachers recognize the need for such inquiry in order to translate curriculum goals into processes by which diverse populations of children make sense of and participate in the world of the classroom.^{38, 39} A successful and seamless curriculum is more likely to be sustained when education professionals take the time to really listen to children, to share their insights with each other, and to learn from these conversations. Education professionals who embrace purposeful examination of teaching and learning bring a much needed form of expertise to their own and others' work on behalf of children's school success. **Questions to ask:**

- *What is the evidence that adults are learning about children's learning?*
- *How is this learning shared with stakeholders outside the classroom?*
- *How are teachers using these insights to inform curriculum and instruction?*

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided the research base for FirstSchool guiding principles for instructional practices and curricula that are effective—*they work!*, essential—*children, too, understand they are learning things of importance*; and ethical—*this orientation to teaching values all children and families, regardless of abilities, ethnicity, language or income*. By responding to children's curiosities and respecting their lives both inside and out of the classroom, attending carefully to the tentative balance between a rigorous and challenging curriculum and one that has personal relevance, involving families in children's learning, and utilizing relationships among adults and children to support projects of inquiry, this curriculum for young children can serve as a basis for a seamless education in schools that function as learning communities for everyone. ■

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