

Promoting Children's School Readiness: Rethinking the Levers for Change

Classroom Characteristics that Improve Children's School Readiness

Improving children's preparation for school success has become a national priority. For decades, researchers have tried to identify the characteristics of early childhood education (ECE) classrooms that can make the greatest difference for participating children. To date, however, the research hasn't offered clear guidelines for how best to promote school readiness in early childhood classrooms.

Growing public investments in ECE, especially prekindergarten (pre-k), make understanding of how different research findings fit together increasingly important. This *NCRECE In Focus* offers teachers and administrators direction in this regard by looking at how two prominent "puzzle pieces" fit together.

Two research strands are of particular interest

1. Most early educators are familiar with research findings indicating that children benefit most from their ECE experiences when their teachers have a Bachelor's degree and specialized training in ECE, class sizes are small, the child-to-teacher ratio is limited, and the classroom uses a particular curriculum. These teacher and classroom characteristics are commonly called *structural features*. Yet, not all studies find that these structural features contribute positively to children's learning and development.
2. A growing body of school readiness research shows the positive contributions that result from children's high quality interactions with their teachers, peers, and learning materials. Because of their consistency, these research findings have elevated confidence in the importance of well constructed teacher-child interactions as a means for promoting children's school readiness.

Different findings about which classroom characteristics most contribute to children's school readiness can leave program administrators and teachers confused about how to organize their classrooms to support children's optimum learning and development.

Rethinking the Role of Teacher and Classroom Characteristics in Promoting Children's Learning and Development

When researchers study the effects of structural features on children's school readiness, they usually look at four teacher and classroom characteristics:

1. Classrooms with a small vs. large class size,
2. Child-to-teacher ratio,
3. The type of curriculum being used, and
4. Teachers with high- vs. low-level credentials.

Typically research tests whether variations in these four characteristics directly influence children's school readiness. Increasingly, research is showing that these characteristics *do not directly cause* children to learn more or develop faster. Additionally, in other research, there are strong findings that show a clear relationship between children's classroom interactions and their school readiness.

In trying to figure out how these two research strands fit together, two possible scenarios have been identified for understanding how children's direct interactions with their teachers, peers, and learning environment relate to class size, child-to-teacher ratio, curriculum type, and teacher qualifications. These two scenarios focus on the *supportive and magnifying roles* that teacher and classroom characteristics can play in furthering the outcomes gained from effective teacher-child interactions. While subtle in their distinctions, they suggest that teacher and classroom characteristics can exercise their influence on child outcomes in two different ways: one by creating conditions for more effective interactions and the other by boosting or "bumping up" the impact of the interactions.

Two Scenarios

Early childhood educators have long valued the importance of children's relationships with adults, peers, and classroom materials. Now, research is affirming this perspective, indicating that *the quality of children's daily classroom interactions with teachers, peers, and learning materials seem to provide the mechanisms through which children's early childhood education experiences promote development of school readiness skills*. While more research is needed to test these scenarios and help them become more descriptive and specific, they open the way to thinking about how these two research strands fit together and how children's development and learning can be better fostered in ECE settings.

Scenario #1: Creating a Supportive Context for Children's Classroom Interactions

Findings show that structural features associated with program quality do not consistently produce positive outcomes for children. Their positive contribution may depend on the "right conditions," and the right conditions might be *when these teacher and classroom characteristics can create the conditions for improving the quality of children's classroom interactions with their teachers, peers, and learning materials*.

Early childhood teachers with higher levels of education and specialized training in ECE, for example, may facilitate children's faster learning and development by providing better-organized and more instructionally-rich experiences. A small class size or low child-to-teacher ratio may influence the development of social skills by creating less chaotic classrooms and permitting children to be part of more emotionally-supportive interactions. Using a particular curriculum may provide children with opportunities to interact with learning materials in a more focused way and engage in higher quality instructional interactions with their teachers and peers.

Scenario #2: Boosting the Positive Impact of Children's Classroom Interactions

Teacher and classroom characteristics such as teacher qualifications, class size, child-to-teacher ratio, and curriculum may also promote a stronger context for learning by *intensifying* or "bumping up" the positive impact of high quality interactions.

For example, research shows that emotionally-supportive interactions between teachers and children have a direct, positive effect on children's social skills. These effects may be even more potent in classrooms bolstered by lower child-to-teacher ratios and smaller class sizes by maximizing for children the benefits of teachers' focused interactions.

Instructionally-rich interactions also positively impact children's academic skill development. This impact may be made greater--i.e., may be maximized--in classrooms that use a curriculum that promotes children's focused and instructionally-oriented interactions with classroom materials.

Children's learning and development seem to occur through the direct and consistent interactions they have over extended periods of time with their teachers, peers, and learning materials. Certain teacher and classroom characteristics may enhance the impact of these interactions on school readiness, either (1) by creating the conditions for more effective interactions or (2) by escalating the benefits derived from the interactions.

Linking Research to Practice

The most important next step from these new insights is to redefine what it means for an early childhood education program to be of high quality.

- Definitions of high quality early childhood classrooms should focus on children's emotionally-supportive, instructionally-rich, and well-organized interactions with their teachers, classmates, and learning materials.
- Classroom structural features such as teachers with a Bachelor's degree and specialized training in ECE, small class sizes, low child-to-teacher ratios, and using a particular curriculum need to be recognized for their potentially important role in supporting and magnifying the presence and impact of teacher-child interactions.

Teacher-child interactions should become a classroom priority.

- School policies, professional development programs, and program improvement initiatives should prioritize efforts to strengthen the quality of classroom interactions that children experience on a daily basis.
- Teachers and administrators should become more selective in their choice of teacher development opportunities, choosing options explicitly designed to improve the quality of teachers' emotional, instructional, and organizational interactions with young children.

Teachers and administrators should focus on making teaching more effective.

- Teachers should try to become more intentional about, attentive to, and reflective on their direct interactions with children and the learning environments they create for children's interactions with peers and with organized learning experiences.
- Administrators need to be sensitive to teacher and classroom characteristics that may support and escalate the effects that teachers' interactional efforts have on school readiness.

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Mashburn, A. & Pianta, R. (in press). Opportunity in Early Education: Improving Teacher-Child Interactions and Child Outcomes. In volume A. Reynolds, A. Rolnick, M. Englund, & J. Temple (Eds.), *Cost-Effective Programs in Children's First Decade: A Human Capital Integration*. New York: Cambridge University Press.