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PRESCHOOL *is* SCHOOL

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS NEED RELEVANT, COLLABORATIVE, AND ALIGNED LEARNING

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Early childhood centers and classrooms perpetually dance between being a *center* or a *school*. Perhaps it doesn't seem different in your mind, but it does to us. To many educators, the word *school* usually

presumes K-12 students. It often means the school is part of a larger entity, like a district or a school board. To parents, school might connote importance or deference to a teacher or principal. To students, the word school might yield a host of intriguing responses.

At left, President Barack Obama visits with head teacher Laura Park and children in a prekindergarten classroom at the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center in Decatur, Georgia, Feb. 14, 2013.

Early childhood educators have learned to navigate between and among all of these assumptions, embracing the assumptions that advance their cause and distancing themselves from those that do not. For instance, using “infant teacher” instead of “day care worker” can produce an entirely new context from which to operate.

In terms of professional learning, early childhood educators are either lumped in with other elementary school teachers or left in their center. It is in those poignant moments when the inequity is clear between early learning and K-12 educators. Not only are early learning educators not considered first, they are often not considered at all, the result of a lack of knowledge surrounding early learning.

We have worked in and for the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center in Decatur, Georgia, which opened in 2005. Serving 340 learners, 450 remain on a waitlist. When President Barack Obama announced universal early childhood learning, he came to Georgia, which has offered two decades of lottery-funded prekindergarten. Georgia Bright from the Start, the agency that oversees early learning, chose College Heights as the model early learning center for

President Obama to visit.

Although that attention was certainly exciting and inspiring, it also gave us a unique vantage point on our own work. As politicians, reporters, interested community members, and even our own parents joined us in celebrating this honor, we realized assumptions are rampant when it comes to early learning. In this article, we identify four assumptions with connections to professional learning. We contend early childhood educators in high-quality centers deserve the same high-quality professional learning as their K-12 counterparts.

ASSUMPTION 1 **Early childhood educators really have what they need in terms of knowledge and strategy.**

Early learning has been plagued by its own context: primarily a female-dominated, low-paying, seemingly relaxed environment. This context plays a role when limited time and resources are expended on education: K-12 usually receives the preference.

For instance, when states began to identify curriculum and learning outcomes for each grade level and subject area, early learning watched from the sidelines. Often, years later, the same

COLLEGE HEIGHTS EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING CENTER

Decatur, Georgia
<http://eclc.csdecatur.net>

340 learners, ages 6 weeks to prekindergarten

72 employees, 78% classified, 22% certified

Opened in **2005**

FUNDING SOURCES:

- **Prekindergarten:** state lottery
- **Preschool special education:** federal funds
- **Birth-to-preschool classes:** tuition paid by parents
- Some tuition slots paid via the Decatur Education Foundation
- Early Head Start for age 2
- Head Start for ages 3 and 4

For more history of the center, see Van Soelen (2012a).

process is replicated for young learners. Georgia experienced this phenomenon in creating the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards.

In K-12 settings, it is becoming more commonplace for groups of educators to examine their standards, unpacking, deconstructing, or some other similar verb meaning to take apart. However, early learning educators don't always take the time to deeply unpack standards. Because their resources are

often not of similar quality to K-12 educators, early childhood educators are often left to their own devices to define what this standard means and what kind of sample student tasks would meet the rigor of the standard.

The College Heights center did not want to leave this to chance. Groups of teachers, along with Zeke Alejandro, the instructional coach, analyzed the standards and created developmental instructional calendars for the infant, toddler, preschool, and prekindergarten classrooms.

In weekly collaborative planning teams, teachers looked at sample performance tasks Alejandro gathered, practicing them with appropriate materials to better understand what was being expected of the learners. On any given Thursday afternoon, teachers of 2-year-olds gather in Alejandro's office to experiment with materials, learning targets, and concept integration.

Even this clear modeling is not always enough. As leaders, we still see what we call "pitching problems": adults presenting the content either too high or too low. The collaborative planning teams become the vehicle for increasing teachers' pitching prowess. We discovered the gap is less about content and pedagogy; instead, it was more about their pedagogical content knowledge.

To ameliorate the gap between desired and current pitching levels, two lenses are always applied in all collaborative learning experiences: inquiry and oral language development. As part of their professional learning, adults at the College Heights center orally rehearse together, practicing the exact language needed to layer language in young learners. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System observation tool, used as program evaluation, calls this teacher sensitivity: how the adults respond to what students are saying and doing.



ASSUMPTION 2

Early childhood educators don't need to collaborate with others.

The best prekindergarten teacher is often the only one, too. The lone prekindergarten class is often a singleton in a public elementary school. At private early learning centers, singletons often exist as well: one infant teacher, one toddler, one preschool, perhaps one prekindergarten. At publicly funded institutions, there may be one Early Head Start room or one Head Start room.

At the College Heights center, historical markers helped increase collaboration. For the first five years of its existence, the Decatur-DeKalb YMCA administered the birth-to-age-3 programs. In 2010, the City Schools of Decatur and the YMCA amicably ended their partnership, and the school

district assumed responsibility of the birth-to-age-3 programs. Free of any artificial or real barriers, the building now became one center with one vision.

Around the same time, the center was developing a stronger relationship with the Head Start provider in the area. After months of negotiating, the center began blending Head Start-funded students. Instead of one single classroom of 17 students funded by Head Start, these 17 students would be dispersed across the four preschool classrooms.

The professional learning impact of this integration was profound. Before 2010, the center constantly danced between four sets of requirements and standards: Head Start, YMCA, Georgia, and the school district. Now one document provided consistent expectations: a crosswalk among Head Start, Georgia, and the district.



White House Photo by PETE SOUZA
Principal Suzanne Kennedy explains the curriculum at College Heights to President Barack Obama. Zeke Alejandro, instructional coach, and Sarah Garland, early childhood specialist, co-facilitated the school tour.

Seeing the College Heights center in this light was certainly a culture shift. Some staff members had been using the different divisions as excuses not to collaborate with others. Similar to hierarchies that can emerge in other elementary, middle, or high schools, the College Heights center was not immune. One common professional learning plan was a significant intervention toward changing that mindset.

One example of this transition is a seasoned prekindergarten teacher who had taught in the school district for many years.

When the College Heights center opened and six prekindergarten

classrooms came together as one, conflict was bound to occur. This teacher was bombarded with new learning: being on a curriculum planning team for the first time, receiving feedback from observers who really knew early learning, and experiencing professional learning that questioned some of her deeply held assumptions.

However, the context played a vital role, too. It is hard to be a lone wolf when a school functions as the kind of professional community Kruse, Louis, and Bryk first documented in 1994 (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). Additionally, the City Schools of Decatur implemented a new teacher evaluation system. To achieve the highest rating, we needed to document impact outside the classroom. This teacher took this challenge to heart, and, at times, we engaged in some tough conversations.

Ten years later, she still teaches young learners but now is a teacher leader. She co-facilitates professional learning with Alejandro. In fact, all professional learning is now co-planned with teacher input. She also serves as a peer coach, welcomed by others into their classrooms.

ASSUMPTION 3 **Early learning educators only need mandatory trainings (e.g. CPR, first aid, EpiPen).**

It must have been foreshadowing, although none of us knew it: Thomas Van Soelen, then associate superintendent of City Schools of Decatur, asked Suzanne Kennedy at her principal interview in 2005, “If you were hired, what would professional development look like in this building? Same for everyone or not?” Kennedy’s answer came to fruition: “Every adult who interacts with kids needs to be developed.”

After several years of traditional, whole-group professional learning, the

College Heights center has evolved into a comprehensive model that offers a variety of differentiated professional learning opportunities. In addition to the collaborative team meetings, where teacher-designed professional learning occurs, three other learning designs exist: peer observation, live peer coaching, and instructional coaching.

The center began using peer observation in 2009. At that time, with a new Georgia teacher observation tool, the teachers and Alejandro began observing in each other’s classroom. Although the new evaluation tool was in their hands, it was on pink paper, which signified that the adults were in classrooms for their own learning, not to evaluate the teacher.

After being in the classroom for less than 10 minutes, the teacher and Alejandro would quietly excuse themselves and debrief in the hall, focused on what the observers learned. Quickly dubbed “pinking,” the practice continues to this day. However, now a teacher may “pink” by herself and then a debrief occurs between the observed and the observer. By removing the administration, “pinking” has continued to build capacity among the teachers, particularly the classified staff.

Live peer coaching came to the center through a partnership with the Marcus Autism Center in Atlanta. A not-for-profit subsidiary of Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, the Marcus Center treats children with autism and related disorders. More recently, the Marcus Center has expanded its outreach program, providing professional development to schools. With a growing number of students with disabilities, particularly autism, College Heights began to work with the Marcus Center in 2014. A learner engagement observation tool called Social Emotional Engagement-Knowledge and Skills is used in early childhood rooms.

In this model, a Marcus Center coach comes to an early learning center, providing direct coaching services to teachers. At the end of the first year, the coach begins to gradually release responsibility, beginning to train some teachers to be live peer coaches. At the end of the second year, the external coach becomes a consultant of the process.

One teacher of 2-year-olds is an example of someone who benefited from this professional learning design. Having earned an associate's degree in an unrelated field, this teacher desired to grow in her ability to use these strategies and increase the engagement of the young learners in her room. After requesting to participate in live peer coaching, two of her colleagues came to her room to observe her interactions with children.

After a 20-minute observation, the observers and the teacher left the classroom to debrief. The team began with successes — what's going well. Through reflection and collaboration, the team formulated agreements to design next steps to increase the children's emotional investment. This peer coaching cycle occurs three times over the course of the year. When this teacher was later observed using the two observation tools, all areas increased.

The final model of support involves a formative coaching cycle with a teacher and Alejandro. This may include modeling, co-planning, co-teaching, and other learning designs.

ASSUMPTION 4
It's a waste of energy to align the work of early childhood classrooms to K-12 systems. It is best to leave them alone.

The very act of creating an early childhood center, devoid of any K-12 grade levels, seems to lend credence to this assumption. However, the physical presence of an early learning building does not need to indicate a separation;

instead, it could denote an area of focus.

Preparing for an accreditation visit from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools gave us an opportunity for district alignment. In the first six years of its history, the College Heights center did not have a school improvement plan. In 2009, the center developed its first school improvement plan and has since been accredited by the state of Georgia, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and AdvancED.

One accolade the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation team identified was the cross-school teacher evaluation process called Standards-Seeking Visits (Van Soelen, 2012b). In a district with just eight principals, Kennedy's voice at the table was vital.

She insisted the College Heights center would be part of the Teacher Quality Initiative, which included a cross-school teacher evaluation process. For the first time, leaders from across the district came to our center. District leaders partnered with each other to craft written feedback to classroom teachers (Van Soelen, 2016) — an important step toward realizing a birth-grade 12 district.

Each of the district's K-12 schools had an instructional coach, and the coaches met monthly as a team to align their efforts. When Alejandro was hired as the College Heights center's instructional coach, it was a significant win for the school and for early learning. For the first time, an early learning educator had a voice at the table. Now there was no question that the center would participate in districtwide initiatives.

When the district sought to improve school practices surrounding Response to Intervention, the College Heights center led the way and has been recognized at the state level for its exemplary Response to Intervention

process and success in serving students at each tier.

MORE THAN DAY CARE

Assumptions abound when it comes to early learning. The unknowns of early childhood classrooms and centers cause inferences that are often incorrect. When it comes to professional learning, adults who work in early childhood settings need just what other educators need: relevant, collaborative, and aligned experiences.

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