

Supporting P-3 Continuity by Connecting Early Childhood Pedagogy and Deeper Learning Principles

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Tipsheets and Guides

In this Workbook

Introduction to Bridging Early Childhood and Deeper Learning

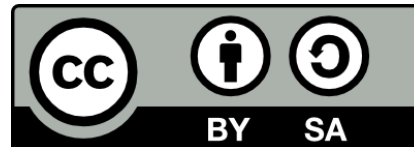
Blending Early Childhood Pedagogy and Deeper Learning Principles

Aligning Emergent Curriculum and Deeper Learning

Leveraging Connections to Support Student-Driven Learning

From Play-Based to Project Based

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Introduction

Why should we connect?

Bridging Early Childhood and Deeper Learning

The Early Childhood Perspective

Early childhood education has long valued student-centered, active learning grounded in real world contexts. Influential frameworks like Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf emphasize experiential learning, student inquiry, and hands-on material exploration. Developmentally appropriate practices meet children where they are socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively.

The Deeper Learning Perspective

Meanwhile, the deeper learning movement in K-12 education champions similar student-driven learning goals and strategies. Deeper learning aims to move beyond rote memorization of facts to actively engage students in analyzing complex problems, critically evaluating information, collaborating, and developing deeper conceptual understanding that transfers. Project-based learning, metacognitive reflection, and skilled communication are hallmarks of deeper learning aligned to college and career readiness aims.

The Value of Connections

Understanding the pedagogical connections between early childhood education and deeper learning is key. Despite divisions between pre-K and elementary scopes and sequences, the learning journey should be continuous, not disjointed. Recognizing shared principles and practices can empower educators to bridge gaps and align objectives, curricula, and learning environments.

The following suite of tools and tips aims to facilitate vertical alignment and continuity based on common foundations. With collaboration, reflection and intentional planning, we can leverage powerful early childhood pedagogy to pave the way for deeper learning across all grade levels. Students will benefit from increased continuity in their developmental progression as explorers, critical thinkers and problem solvers.

Blending Early Childhood Pedagogy with Deeper Learning Principles

It starts with shared understanding

Connections

Between EC Pedagogy & Deeper Learning Principles

There are strong connections and alignments between deeper learning principles and long-standing early childhood education frameworks. The educational philosophies of Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and others valued student-driven, experiential learning grounded in real-world contexts and investigations.

Recognizing the continuity with early childhood pedagogy reminds us that crucial mindsets and skills are established even before elementary school.

Understanding these alignments can strengthen efforts to create a seamless, progressive learning journey across grade levels.



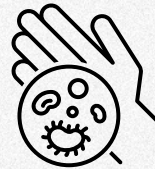
Child-Centered Learning

Instruction that is focused on building student agency and interests.



Critical Thinking

Development of critical thinking and problem-solving from an early age.



Hands-On

Emphasis on active, hands-on exploration and inquiry.



Collaboration

Recognition of collaboration being central to the learning process.



Whole Child

Focus on nurturing the whole child, including social-emotional needs.

Fostering Connections

A Discussion Starter for Early Childhood and Elementary Educators

When early childhood and elementary teachers come together to explore pedagogical connections, thoughtful questions can uncover shared philosophies and spark ideas for alignment.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

For Early Childhood Teachers

What student-centered learning practices do you find most effective for nurturing agency and exploration?

How do you cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving skills through play and inquiry?

What social-emotional learning strategies help children develop collaboration and communication skills?

For Elementary Teachers

How are you implementing deeper learning practices like project-based learning in your classroom?

In what ways do you incorporate student voice and choice into your instruction?

How do you build on young students' innate curiosity and interests?

DEBRIEF AND EXPLORE

Where do you see the strongest connections between your approaches?

What are benefits and challenges with greater vertical alignment?

How can we improve transitions for students between early childhood and elementary?

DISCUSSION STRUCTURE

Explore perceptions: What assumptions exist about differences? Similarities?

Connection: Identify shared goals and approaches using above questions.

Brainstorm: How can alignment be strengthened? What steps are feasible?

Reflect: Summarize key takeaways and next steps.

Aligning Emergent Curriculum and Deeper Learning

Finding commonalities and connections

Alignment

Between Emergent Curriculum & Deeper Learning

Curriculum alignment refers to the intentional sequencing of learning objectives and experiences across grade levels to create a coherent, progressive learning journey for students.

For example, the emergent curriculum model centered on student inquiry and interests aligns with deeper learning approaches that develop critical thinking and problem-solving. Aligning teaching practices around these shared principles can strengthen continuity for students transitioning from early childhood to elementary.

Identifying aligned learning progressions and potential gaps will help inform efforts to bridge programs.

Child Centered Learning

Learning tailored to children's interests, strengths, and needs.

Aligns with student-driven inquiry and critical thinking in deeper learning.

Flexibility & Responsiveness

Willingness to alter direction based on children's evolving interests and questions.

Aligns with adaptability in deeper learning.

Integration of Learning

Learning integrated across domains, reflecting interconnectedness of knowledge/skills. Deeper learning emphasizes interdisciplinary projects.

Collaboration & Co-Construction

Knowledge built through exploration, dialogue and reflection. Deeper learning expands collaboration globally.

Observation & Documentation

Teachers observe play and learning to inform planning and reflection.

Parallels assessment for learning in deeper learning.

Environment as Facilitator

Thoughtfully designed spaces provoke curiosity, discovery and stimulate learning. Deeper learning environments encourage exploration and innovation.

Fostering Curricular Alignment

A Discussion Guide for Early Childhood and Elementary Educators

The goal is to visually capture each team's insights and facilitate discussion on connections and misalignments.

The collaborative hands-on process allows for organic conversation and consensus building.

Child-Centered Learning

How are children's/students' interests, strengths and needs driving learning?
What opportunities exist for student voice, choice, and inquiry?
How can we build in more student ownership over learning across levels?

Integration of Learning

How is interdisciplinary learning promoted through projects and activities?
Where can additional cross-curricular connections be made?
How can learning be better connected to real-world contexts?

Observation & Documentation

How are observations being used to inform planning and instruction?
What systems are in place for tracking growth and mastery?
How can documentation practices align more seamlessly across levels?

Flexibility and Responsiveness

How adaptable are teachers to student needs, interests, and pace?
What mechanisms enable pivoting the learning focus?
How can we build in more flexibility for continuity between levels?

Collaborative & Co-Construction

What collaborative learning opportunities are provided and how can they be expanded?
How are students co-constructing and sharing knowledge?
How can collaboration extend to experts and community partners?

Environment as Facilitator

How does the classroom environment provoke inquiry, discovery, and thinking?
What enhancements could make the space more intellectually stimulating?
How can continuity in learning environments be supported across levels?

Gather

A large whiteboard or chart paper
Different colored dry erase markers or sticky notes.
Virtual workspace like Miro

Create

Teachers by grade or age group respond to the questions in each area using an assigned color marker or sticky note.

Discuss

Discuss similarities and differences you notice. Identify alignment opportunities.

Leveraging Student-Centered Learning Approaches

Progressive learning for developing minds

Leveraging Student Centered Learning Approaches

We can nurture progressive, student-driven learning across grade levels by recognizing six key ways that student-centered approaches align in early childhood and deeper learning.

Active Exploration & Inquiry

Early Childhood
Hands-on play and learning through exploration of materials, ideas, peers

Deeper Learning
Project-based learning requiring active investigation and application

Choice & Agency

Early Childhood
Choices in activities and centers that follow interests

Deeper Learning
Autonomy through projects tied to interests and passions

Individualized Learning

Early Childhood
Adapts to developmental stages and pace

Deeper Learning
Personalized learning plans, differentiated instruction

Social Emotional Development

Early Childhood
Group activities build skills through peer interactions

Deeper Learning
SEL integrated into curriculum and collaborative projects

Responsive Teaching

Early Childhood
Scaffolding and tailored interactions

Deeper Learning
Facilitators provide adaptive guidance and feedback

Family Community Involvement

Early Childhood
Families as partners in learning

Deeper Learning
Community partnerships and service learning

Conversation Guide

for bridging student-centered learning across grade levels.

While the core principles remain the same, consider developmental needs in implementation:

Structure and guidance: Provide more direction and supervised exploration in early childhood. Allow for more independent work in upper elementary.

Concrete to abstract: Focus on hands-on learning in early childhood. Introduce more symbolic and abstract concepts in upper grades.

Teacher's role: Child-led in early childhood with teacher scaffolding. Ensure academic rigor in upper grades.

Individualized learning: Focus on developmental milestones in early childhood, grade-level standards mastery in upper grades.

Social-emotional skills: Progress from basic skills like sharing to managing stress and behaviors.

Community involvement: Classroom partnerships in early childhood to broader community service-learning opportunities in upper grades.

Student choice: Choosing activity centers in early childhood to choosing project topics/inquiries in upper grades.

Assessment: Observational notes to documentation of work products and mastery.

How can we provide developmentally appropriate structure and guidance?

What hands-on, concrete learning experiences are needed?

How can teachers scaffold to ensure students reach the next level?

How can we assess progress developmentally?

What social-emotional skills need further development?

How can community involvement expand appropriately?

What choices and autonomy are suitable at each level?

From Play-Based to Project Based

Cultivating learning landscapes

Transitioning From Play-Based to Project-Based Learning

The move from play-based to project-based learning requires a thoughtful and strategic approach, balancing the intrinsic motivation and exploratory nature of young learners with the structured, goal-oriented framework of projects. It necessitates careful planning to ensure activities are developmentally appropriate and aligned with educational standards.

Educators must scaffold this transition, providing support and guidance while gradually increasing the complexity and student autonomy in learning tasks.

Review & Reflect

Review the continuum for each grade level to understand the progression and expectations. Reflect on your current practices and how they align with the suggested activities and emphases.

Collaboration & Share

Work with colleagues to share ideas, strategies, and successes related to implementing the continuum. Collaboration can provide additional insights and support as you transition your teaching practices.

Plan Gradually

Use the table as a guide to plan your curriculum. Start by integrating small changes that align with the continuum's suggestions and gradually incorporate more as students become comfortable with new learning styles.

Assess & Adjust

Regularly assess the effectiveness of the new strategies in your classroom. Solicit feedback from students, parents, and other educators to understand what is working and what might need adjustment. Use this feedback to make informed changes to your approach.

Customize

Adapt the activities and emphasis based on the specific needs, interests, and abilities of your students. The continuum serves as a guide, but flexibility is key to meeting the diverse needs of your class.

Document & Reflect

Keep a record of the projects and activities undertaken at each grade level. Reflect on these experiences and document student progress and challenges. This documentation will be valuable for planning future activities and for sharing with other educators.

Continuum of Learning

for moving from play-based to project-based learning.

This continuum was designed as a tool to enhance learning experiences for students, ensuring that the transition from play-based to project-based learning is both effective and enjoyable.

Grade	Emphasis	Key Activities	Skills Developed	Community Involvement
P	Play-based learning with an introduction to project elements.	Hands-on exploration, imaginative play, and simple group projects based on shared interests.	Social-emotional skills like sharing and collaboration, introduction to group work, and communication.	Families involved in storytelling, sharing cultures, and community exploration days.
K	Balanced play-based and project-based activities, moving towards more child-led inquiries.	Teacher-led activities integrated with child-initiated projects, increased role in decision-making in centers.	Developing independence, problem-solving within play contexts, and basic project management skills like planning and executing simple tasks.	Local community members invited for interactive sessions, and students begin small, class-based community projects.
1	Transition to more structured project-based activities with continued support.	Balanced structured activities with longer-term, teacher-guided projects; introduction to research skills.	Learning to work collaboratively, basic research and inquiry, responsibility through classroom jobs related to projects.	Organized field trips that connect with project themes, and community helpers involved in classroom activities.
2	Greater autonomy in project-based learning with teacher as facilitator.	Daily project activities chosen by children, integration of subjects within projects, and introduction to reflective practices.	Critical thinking, decision-making in project topics and execution, and balanced individual and group work.	Collaboration with local organizations for projects, students take on more visible roles in community engagement.
3	Full immersion in project-based learning with increased student-driven inquiry.	Long-term projects with significant student choice, interdisciplinary approaches, and assessment based on project outcomes.	In-depth research and analysis, leadership within project execution, and effective communication of findings.	Development and execution of service-learning projects, increased collaboration with community organizations, and reflective sessions that include community feedback.