



IMPACT AREA:

Sustained High-Quality Experiences

Why Do They Matter?

Children perform best when there is consistency and continuity across educational experiences — in other words, when high-quality educational experiences are sustained. Achieving sustained, high-quality experiences requires attention to both programmatic alignment across pre-K to third grade, and processes that facilitate smooth student transitions. Education programs are strongly aligned when structures, policies, practices, curricula and assessments work together seamlessly across ages and grade levels to support and maintain children's success. Student transitions are effective when they allow for easy navigation across grades and between learning environments.

ELN'S CONTRIBUTION

ELN researchers have expanded the field's knowledge base of how alignment and transition practices support the development of math, language, literacy and social-behavioral skills, and identified current practices that create barriers to sustained experiences. **Alignment** and **transition practices** have been identified as being open to change or improvement through early learning practice and policy decisions.

What We Learned

- Intentional efforts to sustain high-quality experiences, such as using transition practices, promoting positive student-teacher relationships and sharing information across grades, may benefit all children, and especially those from marginalized backgrounds. However, there is variability in the degree to which students experience sustained experiences across grades. Sustained high-quality experiences alone do not consistently result in better outcomes; experiences must be high quality and aligned.
- Aligned practices between pre-K and kindergarten are positively associated with children's academic and social-behavioral outcomes. Alternatively, inconsistent academic and social environments across pre-K and kindergarten, including varying amounts of transition practices, may be difficult for children's kindergarten adjustment, particularly for children from marginalized backgrounds.
- Identifying barriers to effective transitions and alignment may be starting points for specifying policy and practice modifications.

SUPPORTING FINDINGS

Alignment Practices

- Intentionality in aligning structures, curricula and instructional content provides an opportunity to promote sustained experiences across pre-K and elementary programs¹ and support the benefits of the pre-K experience.
- Children's cumulative experiences in early grades are predictive of later social-behavioral outcomes for children from English- and Spanish-speaking families.²

- Between pre-K and kindergarten:
 - › Differences between academic and social environments may be difficult for children as they adjust to kindergarten, particularly for children from families with low incomes, dual language learners and those from minoritized communities of color.³
 - › Evidence of alignment includes progression toward advanced academic content from pre-K to kindergarten and similarity in child-centered ideas.⁴
 - › Evidence of misalignment includes redundancies in foundational content, particularly for children living at or below the poverty line;⁵ few teachers matched to students' diverse ethnic/linguistic backgrounds; and more teacher-structured activities and less effective teacher-child interactions.⁴
 - › Reasons for weak alignment include debate over early childhood education, procedures disrupting data sharing and transition practices,⁶ limited funding and a lack of culture supporting alignment.⁷



- There tends to be greater alignment between kindergarten and elementary grades than from pre-K to third grade.⁸ When misalignment occurs in the form of redundancies between pre-K and kindergarten, it is primarily in foundational (not complex) language, literacy and math content.⁵

Transition Practices

- Challenges in the transition to kindergarten are common, with at least half of students experiencing some difficulties with academic and social-behavioral skills. Boys and children with IEPs experience greater difficulties.⁹
- Sustained, positive student-teacher relationships across transitions from pre-K to first grade predict improved social skills.¹⁰
- Data sharing on individual children is associated with higher literacy skills as children transition to kindergarten,¹¹ and is more common when pre-K programs are co-located in elementary school buildings.¹²
- Lack of communication and inability to bring together pre-K and elementary personnel prevent effective transition to kindergarten.¹³

Takeaways & Action Steps

The key takeaways and action steps for practice, policy and research are intended to be:

- **Inclusive of all children**, but especially relevant for children from marginalized groups (e.g., racially minoritized, dual language learners).
- **Culturally responsive** in application.
- **Relevant across varied geographic contexts.**
- **The shared responsibility** of all educational faculty, administrators and staff.



SUSTAINED HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENCES

KEY TAKEAWAY

Educational experiences should include **consistency and continuity** of high-quality opportunities **across pre-K to third grade**, including alignment of experiences within the early elementary grades (K-3).

ACTION STEPS

Practice	Policy	Research
<p>Provide pre-service and in-service educators, administrators and support staff with high-quality professional learning opportunities, including customized training and coaching, to support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of evidence-based, aligned curricula. • Continuity of instructional content and positive interactions across pre-K to third grade. 	<p>Invest in the use of integrated data systems to promote alignment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify barriers and facilitators to implementing aligned educational experiences in diverse pre-K to third grade systems from the perspectives of families, educators and administrators. • Develop and/or identify evidence-based, culturally relevant curricula, practices and assessments grounded in social-behavioral and academic content that promote continuity in instruction and teacher practices across pre-K to third grade.



Dig Deeper



Watch a short research presentation to learn more about the Early Learning Network's findings related to sustained high-quality experiences.

To access the video, visit our [media library](#) or use your phone's camera to scan the QR code.

Presenter: Meghan McCormick, Ph.D., MDRC

ENDNOTES

¹McCormick, M. P., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Maier, M., Hagos, R., Snow, C., Leacock, N., & Schick, L. (2019). Promoting content-enriched alignment across the early grades: A study of policies & practices in the Boston Public Schools. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 52*, 57-73.

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³Vitiello, V., Nguyen, T., Ruzek, E., Pianta, R. C., & Whittaker, J. V. (2022). Differences between pre-K and kindergarten classroom experiences: Do they predict children's social-emotional skills and self-regulation across the transition to kindergarten? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 59*, 287-299.

⁴Vitiello, V. E., Pianta, R. C., Whittaker, J. E., & Ruzek, E. A. (2020). Alignment and misalignment of classroom experiences from pre-K to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Quarterly, 52*, 44-56.

⁵Cohen-Vogel, L., Little, M., Jang, W., Burchinal, M., & Bratsch-Hines, M. (2021). A missed opportunity? Instructional content redundancy in pre-K and kindergarten. *AERA Open, 7*, 1-15.

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⁹Jiang, H., Justice, L. M., Purtell, K. M., Lin T.-J., & Logan, J. (2021). Prevalence and prediction of kindergarten-transition difficulties. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 55*, 15-23.

¹⁰Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Boise, C., Witte, A., Koziol, N., Prokasky, A., Schumacher, R., & Kerby, H. (2022). Relationships as malleable factors for children's social-behavioral skills from preschool to grade 1: A longitudinal analysis. *Early Education and Development, 33*, 958-978.

¹¹Garber, K. L., Foster, T. J., Little, M. H., Cohen-Vogel, L., Bratsch-Hines, M., & Burchinal, M. R. (2022). Transition practices of rural pre-K and kindergarten teachers and their relations to children's academic and social skills. *Early Education and Development*.

¹²Little, M., Cohen-Vogel, L., Sadler, J., & Merrill, B. (2019). Data-driven decision making in early education: Evidence from North Carolina's pre-K program. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*.

¹³Purtell, K. M., Valauri, A., Rhoad-Drogalis, A., Jiang, H., Justice, L. M., Lin, T.-J., & Logan, J. A. (2020). Understanding policies and practices that support successful transitions to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 52*, 5-14.