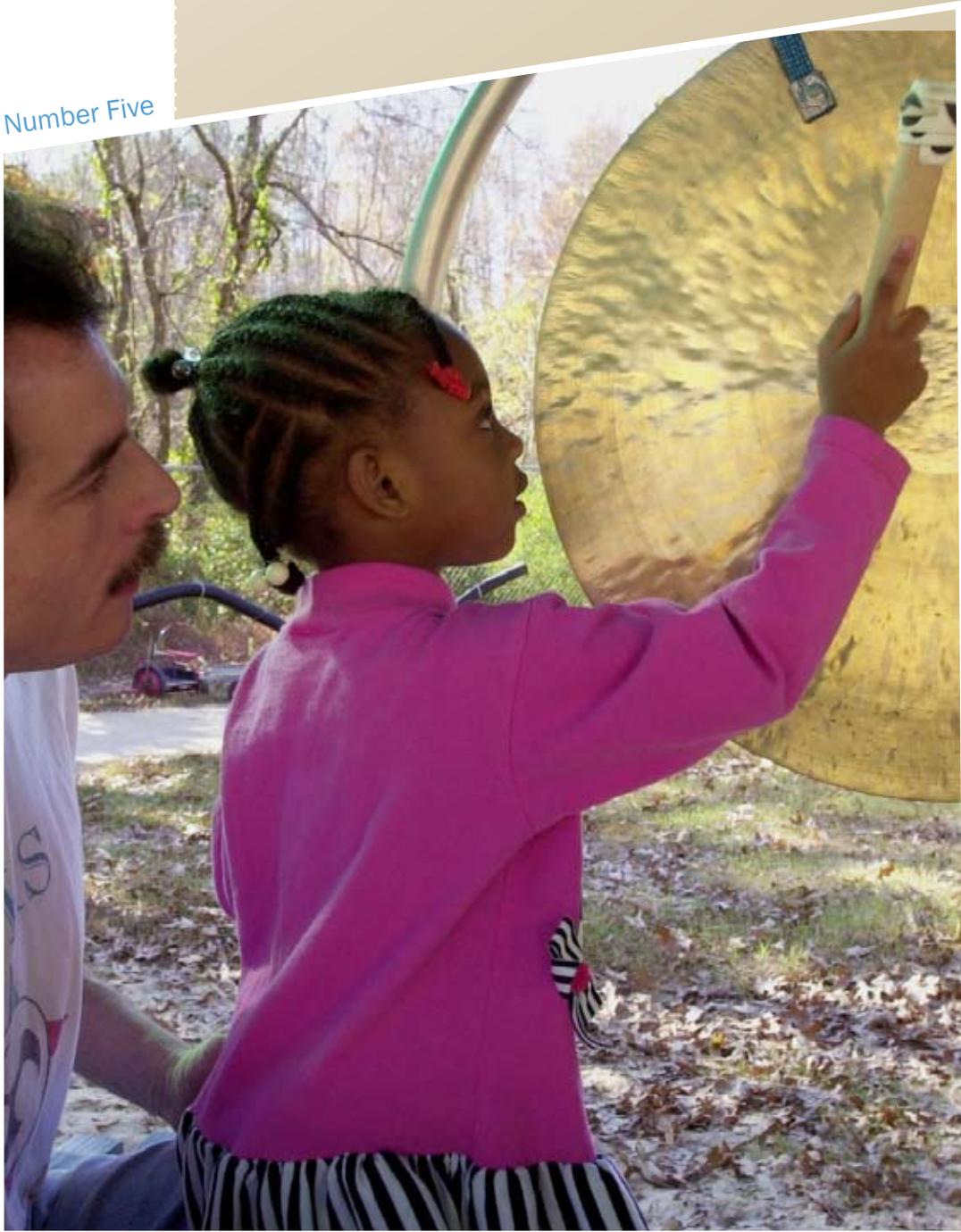


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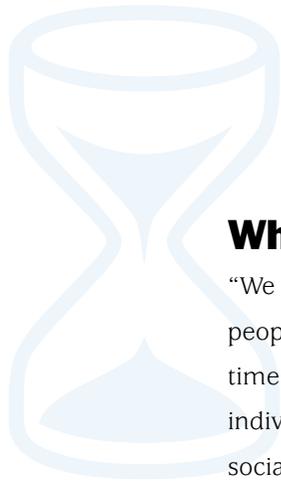
Number Five

Issues in PreK-3rd Education



Time Is of the Essence

Sharon Ritchie & Gisele Crawford



Why Do We Need to Re-think Time?

“We don’t have time!” This is perhaps the most universal complaint from people who work in schools. And the things they specifically don’t have time for are planning, meeting with colleagues, meaningful time with individual students, and engaging with families. Because the cognitive and social development that promotes learning occurs in an interactive context for both children and adults,¹ it is essential that the restructuring of schools focus on re-prioritizing the use of time to promote communication between and among interdisciplinary education professionals, children, families and community service providers.

Teachers also do not have the time they need to learn new skills, understand new concepts,² acquire more in-depth understanding of subject matter and pedagogy, and learn how to teach students who are different from themselves.³

This brief focuses on strategies and approaches used in the United States and internationally to re-prioritize the use of time in schools, and explores several areas of time-use beyond those most often cited in the literature. To date, most of the discussion about time has been about finding time for teachers to plan their work and attend professional development programs. In the next section we provide an overview of traditional efforts to provide planning and professional development time, the challenges encountered and some innovative efforts to address those challenges. While well-intentioned, these efforts are inadequate to the real need for change in how time is spent in schools.

Time for Planning and Professional Development

A review of international educational systems reveal that teachers in some countries spend just over 50% of their time in the classroom⁴ as compared to teachers in the United States who spend 80% of the day in the classroom.⁵ Specifically, in most European and Asian countries, teachers spend about half of their work day preparing for classes, working collaboratively with other teachers to develop the curriculum and assessments, having one-to-one meetings with students and parents, as well as learning through study groups and demonstration lessons.⁶

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.

www.firstschool.us

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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Who is the UNC-CH SOE?

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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Despite decades of effort in the US to provide more non-instructional time for teachers, the reality remains that the majority of elementary school teachers have less than 3 hours of planning time per week (8.3 minutes of planning for every hour in the classroom) and most spend 10-15 hours a week outside the work day planning, preparing, and grading.⁷ The National Staff Development Council suggests that 25% of teacher time be devoted to professional growth,⁸ and the National Education Commission on Time and Learning recommends that at least 50 hours of instruction, practice, and follow-up technical assistance are needed for teachers to be comfortable applying new teaching strategies.⁹ In an eight hour day, that equals 2 hours per day, 10 hours per week, 40 hours per month.

When teachers have input into what happens in their school day, they are more likely to participate purposefully and meaningfully, apply what they learn to the classroom, and be enthusiastic. Specifically, changes to scheduling and use of time are more effective when education professionals are included in the re-organization of the schedule, help determine priorities, clearly understand the gains and losses associate with each decision about the use of time, regularly reflect on the way that time is used, give any change time to show its merit, and are given guidance as to how to use time effectively.^{10, 11}

Traditional strategies. Schools have developed an array of strategies recognizing that non-instructional time for teachers is important to student learning. Many schools utilize their specialists in music, art and physical education to provide instruction for children while regular classroom teachers plan. The use of college students and volunteers to teach or supervise activities may also create planning time for teachers.¹² Some schools provide time for teachers by creating teams of teachers (i.e., having six teachers assigned to four classes) in order to free up two teachers at any one time to have opportunities for other professional activities. In

some places, a substitute bank of 30-40 days per year is established so that teachers may participate in planning and professional development activities. “Banking time” adds minimal time to each instructional day that is accumulated for early release or delayed openings. Schools have also re-examined how to better manage time during staff meetings, using them for planning and professional development instead of spending time on informational and administrative details. In North Carolina, schools develop their own plans for providing duty free instructional planning time and duty free lunch periods for every teacher.

Challenges. While adding time for planning, these strategies come at a cost. When thinking about young children age 3–8, it is especially important to consider that these strategies mean that children must manage more transitions, adjust to the academic and behavioral expectations of multiple people, lose contact time with their own teacher, and experience crowded classrooms and high student-teacher ratios.

Innovation. The constraints of trying to carve out time within the traditional school calendar have led schools in many states to adopt a single track year-round school calendar. Year-round schools have the potential to correct the “fundamental design flaw” of the 9-month school calendar,¹³ giving teachers larger blocks of time during inter-sessions to collaborate and to attend to professional development needs. Allowing educators the time they need to be effective may demand a complete restructuring of what has been held sacrosanct in education—the 8AM–3PM instructional day, the 9 month year. Many teachers would say that the 8–3 day/9-month year is a fiction, and that they work long hours before and after school, on the weekends and during vacations in order to meet the needs of their students.

What Would Schools Be Like If We Used Research to Define Our Practice?

An initiative in effect in Massachusetts since 2006 is one example of an innovative approach to this kind of restructuring. Funded by the Massachusetts Board of Education, ten schools have been part of an Expanded Learning Time Initiative. The schools in the project have high minority and high poverty populations and are struggling with proficiency. Each participating school lengthened its school day to add time in language arts, math and science. Schools had the freedom to restructure the schedule and redesign their own programs. Teachers expressed positive feelings about the project noting that they were able to take advantage of teachable moments, integrate project-based learning, identify areas of real need and increase opportunities to address them, bring cultural and community organizations into the school to provide elective courses and put a genuine focus on relationship building and social development.¹⁴

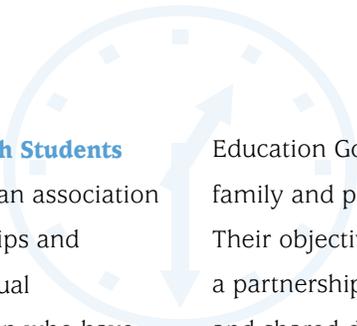
FirstSchool recognizes education professionals' need for increased time to 1) engage in professional learning communities to use student work and school data as the source for improving instructional quality, 2) develop positive relationships with their students, 3) build and sustain school-family partnerships, 4) learn new skills and acquire more in-depth understanding of subject matter, and 5) enhance communication across disciplines. In the next section we examine what school could look like if we used our research knowledge to define our practices.

1. Professional Learning Communities

Scholars argue that the knowledge teachers need to teach well emanates from systematic inquiries about teaching, learners and learning, curriculum, schools and schooling. This knowledge is constructed collectively in local and broader communities¹⁵ that require sustained collaboration to work on problems or issues encountered

in daily practice.¹⁶ Darling Hammond promotes a collaborative, non-isolated work environment, and urges the field to expand the notion of professional development to include the use of student work and school data as a source of inquiry into practice. This work is done within professional learning communities or communities of practice that include a group of professionals or other stakeholders who pursue a shared learning enterprise, focused on a particular topic.¹⁷ The term “communities of practice” stems from the work of Lave and Wenger¹⁸ who were interested in examining the social relationships that provide the context for learning, and exploring how meanings are created and recreated in the practices of existing communities. Within the communities, knowledge is not transmitted from person to person but rather is constructed together, and individuals within the community are seen as interdependent. These communities are most effective if they focus on information gathering, hypothesis building, dialogue, experimenting, and access to a broad pool of content experts.¹⁹

Communities of practice are gaining popularity across the nation, but they take time. Districts and individual schools are prioritizing time to help teachers develop a mindset that pushes them past the notion that there is a simple right answer or a formula that will solve the complex problems they encounter in classrooms. Instead they are encouraged to seek new information, value the knowledge and experience of other professionals, and inquire into their own practice. They use time in professional learning communities to examine student work in order to identify curricular and instructional practices that support student success, and to differentiate learning opportunities for children who are struggling in specific areas.



2. Developing Positive Relationships with Students

Research has consistently demonstrated an association between positive teacher-child relationships and children's social, emotional, and intellectual competence.^{20,21} In the classroom, children who have positive relationships with their teacher are more able to make use of learning opportunities, make friends, and benefit from early positive relationships as they move forward in school. Despite this knowledge, time in and out of the classroom for the development of meaningful relationships is rarely prioritized. The demands on teachers to meet standards and prepare students for testing have taken precedence, and teachers feel increased pressure to focus on academic curricula and the development of discrete skills. They struggle to find time for the kinds of interactions known to be foundational to children's academic and social success.²² It appears that little time is spent in conversations that enhance social development, scaffold learning, or build vocabulary. A study of preschool in eleven states revealed that children were engaged in meaningful interactions with teachers about 3% of their day. This translates into somewhere between 7 and 10 minutes per day depending on the length of the school day.²³

3. Building and Sustaining School-Family Partnerships

Educators also need more time to develop meaningful relationships with family members. There is a strong research base that supports the need to address this issue. We know that when teachers understand and respect families, share information about children with families, and work with them, children's school experiences and their development are positively affected.^{24, 25} Parental involvement with their children's schooling has strong and long-lasting effects on children's school performance, benefiting the development of their language, self-help, motor, adaptive, and basic school skills.²⁶ The National

Education Goals Panel emphasizes the importance of family and parental support in children's school success. Their objective is for every school to engage parents in a partnership that supports academic learning at home and shared decision making in schools.²⁷

We need to insure that families are willing to make a commitment to help their children succeed in school and to convey to their children the message that the school is a good place for the child to be and that the teacher is to be trusted and respected. The challenge to this work is in establishing trust among people who differ in terms of power, status, race, and gender and who traditionally have not had the communication structures or time to develop important relationships. This would be a sea change in schools that would require a commitment to moving slowly, reflecting honestly, listening carefully, and integrating the ideas of all partners in a significant and discernible manner.

Schools need to work with families to discover the answer to the following questions and then determine the time structures that will support the necessary interactions.

1. In what ways is education a shared responsibility between schools and families?
2. What does it mean for families to be involved in their children's education?
3. How do schools and families work together to create a positive school experience that honors all students and their families?

4. Learning New Skills and Acquiring More In-depth Understanding of Subject Matter

If we are going to achieve positive effects of using time to develop better teachers we need to make careful decisions about the kinds of new skills and information teachers need most. An extensive review is not possible here, but four key areas are highlighted for consideration. 1) Scholars argue that teachers

who understand *how* learning occurs are better able to select and develop curricula that supports the learning process.²⁸ 2) Teachers who understand child development and learning are more likely to select learning experiences, tasks, materials, and instructional strategies that meet children where they are, maintain their motivation, and move them toward greater competence.²⁹ Research suggests that the varied use of strategies is the hallmark of a versatile teacher who is able to select among teaching approaches to match students' learning styles.³⁰ 3) Several research strands in developmental science have important implications for early education. These include: developmental neuroscience, cognition and memory, socio-emotional development, and language and literacy development. In reflecting on research across these strands, four foundations of young children's development and learning—self-regulation; representation; memory; and attachment—emerge as salient. These four foundational processes appear to underlie children's developing competence and predict success in school across the span from pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade.³¹ 4) Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, our nation's report card on education, continues to tell us that many children have not acquired important skills during the early school years. In 2007, 43 % of White fourth-graders tested at or above "proficient" in reading, and only 14 % of Black children and 17 % of Hispanic children were considered "proficient" or higher in reading.³² The findings are only slightly better in math.³³ These data highlight the achievement gap between minority and majority as well as between low-income and higher-income children. A number of studies over the past decade have shown that this gap appears early—before children enter kindergarten. Over their experiences in K-12, the achievement gap is not diminished and many boys lose the sense of eagerness and excitement about school to a position of passive disengagement. Race must

be central to conversations about effective teaching. Professional development must embody a social justice agenda that pushes educators to take responsibility for responding to the conditions that contribute to an ongoing national crisis that perpetuates situations where racial minority children and children in poverty continue to achieve below their White and more advantaged peers.

5. Enhancing Communication between Interdisciplinary Professionals

To become effective collaborators, professionals need opportunities to team and collaborate with one another. Communication structures that promote regular engagement between interdisciplinary experts encourage the integration of instructional strategies that help professionals move toward an integrated and holistic approach to children's learning. Meaningful partnerships between education professionals and related service providers (e.g., school nurses, occupational therapists, psychologists, subject specialists, speech and language specialists), community agencies (e.g., health, mental health, churches, social service providers), and university faculty are essential to continuing growth and development of quality instructional practices. Below are a few examples of creative partnerships.

Perry and colleagues brought together a group of 10 primary teachers (K-3), three school-based remedial / resource teachers, one district curriculum consultant, and two university teachers/researchers to form a community interested in assessment of literacy instruction. The group met once a month for 3 hours each time. Members were committed to experiment with new techniques in the classroom between meetings and had opportunities to describe, evaluate, reflect, and seek advice from other members.³⁴

School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) is a systematic approach for broadly improving student

behavior across school environments. SWPBS uses team-based strategies aimed at bringing together general and special education teachers, administration, families, students, and related personnel to learn new skills, make decisions, and implement educational strategies that support learning and development of all students.³⁵

Better communication among and between all adults who are involved in the education and care of young children would allow schools to improve family-school partnerships, improve the school experience for all children, and insure quality instruction.

Summary

This brief has focused on strategies and approaches used in the United States and internationally to reprioritize the use of time in schools and explored several areas of time use beyond those most often cited in the literature. The evidence base as well as professional expertise continues to tell us that in order for schools to be more effective and more responsive to children and families, it is essential to engage in professional learning communities, develop positive relationships with students, build and sustain school-family partnerships, learn new skills and acquire more in-depth understanding of subject matter, and enhance communication across disciplines. It is time to use the experiences of others as well as our evidence base to advocate for significant change in the use of time in schools. ☺

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