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Early childhood and K-12 educators have a lot to learn from each other, Iheoma Iruka says.

Early learning and K-12 go hand in hand

A conversation with IHEOMA IRUKA

Q: You advocate for early childhood and K-12 systems to work together and learn from one another. Why is that important?

A: There's a lot we can and should do to align the early childhood and K-12 spaces. It's not just about aligning curriculum or assessments but also about teachers coming together and sharing approaches. Early childhood educators need to know what happens once their kids move on to K-12. And K-12 educators should really understand what's happening in the early childhood space.

A lot happens before children enter your school. If you're not supporting those children, families, and communities, you're going to pay the cost somewhere, whether in suspension data, remediation data, or somewhere else. All the data will show you that you're spending a lot of money to deal with the things that you

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could have shored up early on. It makes your job as a K-12 teacher easier if the students get that early childhood education first.

Q: What role should public schools play in supporting early childhood education systems and educators?

A: Part of what K-12 can do is start to think about younger children as part of their responsibility and be part of a strong, unified early childhood system. For example, K-12 educators could advocate for the professionalization of the early childhood system by encouraging salary parity across the early childhood space. The compensation for early childhood teachers is vastly different based on whether they teach in a school-based or community-based setting.

K-12 leaders can articulate that “we don’t want our partners who educate and care for our young children to be at this level of poor pay” and advocate for all those who work with children from the time they are born to get equitable pay and benefits. For example, they can publicly support levies to fund early childhood.

It’s also important to think about equity and meeting the needs of Black people across early education and K-12. A lot of the K-12 system is based on

segregation, but early childhood is even more highly segregated. The more schools can call out issues of segregation across their communities, the more they can call for equitable resources to be allocated.

Q: Early childhood educators can also help improve K-12. What would you like to see public schools learn from early childhood?

A: First is the idea that children learn based on relationships. Early childhood educators really understand that for them to be able to fully engage with and support a child, they need to really know about that child and their family to understand they are true and authentic to what they need.

Second is a focus on social-emotional health and learning. Early childhood educators have always known this is important for students’ ability to pay attention, self-regulate, develop relationships with peers, solve problems, and more. Now, because of COVID, I expect to see K-12 teachers ask for more social-emotional support and resources. I’m hoping they’ll look back into early childhood and ask: What do you do to support a classroom culture that really builds on children’s social-emotional development and strengthens their social-emotional health?

Third is using observation, which

is critically important. K-12 educators tend to rely a lot on children to tell them what they’re learning and how they’re doing. Early childhood teachers tend to look for other ways to know what a child knows, feels, and thinks. Children regulate in different ways, even in the same classroom. Not all students are going to respond to the teacher and the classroom in the same way. So what are you doing to make sure that all kids are getting their needs met, including kids who are not vocal? That’s where observation is really powerful.

Q: What examples have you seen of alignment between early childhood and K-12?

A: There is an organization called Pre-K to 3 that has been leading this kind of work for many years, and there’s a lot of work happening at the system level in places like Washington state and Boston Public Schools.

The federal government also recognizes that this alignment work needs to happen. One of the federal grants I’m co-principal investigator on is the Early Learning Network. The focus is on what the transition from pre-K to grade 3 looks like and how policy can strengthen the learning for children and families.

It is really three studies. The first is to see what policies strengthen pre-K-3 alignment in districts and states. The second is to look at what are the malleable factors in the classroom that matter for alignment, and the third is a longitudinal study of how children who are in a formal early childhood program are experiencing education from pre-K to grade 3 compared to children who don't have a formal early childhood program.

We're in the final year of the study now. We'll do a big summit in a couple of years to share what we know so far across the participating sites [in Massachusetts, Virginia, Ohio, North Carolina, and Nebraska, as well as the assessment site in California].

Q: Your work, including the new Equity Research Action Coalition Program that you are leading, focuses on early childhood education and health among historically marginalized communities, especially Black children and families. What are your current priorities in this area?

A: The goal is to recenter the research to use a strengths-based and asset-focused frame. So much of the research we have about Black families comes from a deficit frame, emphasizing risk factors and horrible outcomes. We're working to change that and focus on assets, on what Black families and communities bring to the world.

To do that, we are creating more alignment and deeper connectivity among research, programs, and policy in the early childhood space. It's more coordinated than [the traditional approach in which] research tells programs and policies what to do. That doesn't work.

Instead, we're looking to programs to see what they are doing in the service of Black children and families, and [then asking]: How can research bring that to light? Looking to policymakers, [we're asking]: What is it you don't know that we can help you with in terms of evidence and data to make sure

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Early Learning Network,
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Equity Research Action Coalition, UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, fpg.unc.edu/equity-research-action-coalition

García Coll, C.T., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H.P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B.H., & García, H.V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development, 67*(5), 1891-1914.

Gardner-Neblett, N., Pungello, E.P., & Iruka, I.U. (2012). Oral narrative skills: Implications for the reading development of African American children. *Child Development Perspectives, 6*(3), 218-224.

National P-3 Center,
nationalp-3center.org

your policies are both Black-centered and antiracist?

Q: One area of your work involves rethinking assessments in early childhood settings, especially settings that serve historically marginalized communities. Why and how should we measure success differently?

A: There are so many competencies and assets that children, especially Black children, bring that we are not measuring and should be. There was work done by Cynthia Garcia Coll and other scholars in 1996 that elevated the fact that while we look at language, numeracy, and all those cognitive assessments, there are other things we don't measure that probably benefit children, like positive racial identity, biculturalism, being able to cope with racism, microaggressions, and other discrimination.

The strengths that Black children

bring include oral language, as my colleagues and I have documented. Black children tend to tell a lot of rich stories, and that's not captured in our assessments. We capture very discrete knowledge, so this positions Black children as not knowing a lot, when there's a lot that they know. The form that we ask it in only privileges one way of knowing.

If you're only measuring certain kinds of language and math, that means that everything my kids are learning at home right now [during remote schooling] might not be captured. When they come in to school, someone might say, "Oh, they have all this learning loss," but that's just based on their standard metric. If you look at their oral language, storytelling, problem solving, curiosity, this is what gets them through life and makes them successful in life.

So this isn't just about Black children, but about how we measure the things that will make all children successful in life. Let's measure the things that we already measure, but let's also expand it so that we're not always privileging one group at the loss of another group.

Q: How might educators begin to use different kinds of measurement?

A: One tool that I'm working on with Stephanie Curenton at Boston University and some other colleagues is the Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES). The idea is to measure how much equitable opportunity teachers are providing to racially minoritized students in the classroom, in terms of personalized learning, conversation, incorporating children's lives and languages, whether it be formal language like Spanish or African American Vernacular English or another language, and also issues of bias and inequitable discipline.

For example, how much are children being shamed in terms of behavior management, and what strategies are teachers using, especially

with Black boys? We have a version of the tool out that's being used across many different programs and studies, but that's just one tool. We need a lot of tools.

Q: What do you see as some of the most important professional learning priorities right now?

A: First, this is an opportune time for us to shape the mindsets of our educators — from early childhood through K-12 — to recognize that Black children and children of Indigenous and Latine origins have been living in a space where a lot of trauma is happening. There needs to be a level of acknowledgement that no matter your race, you as a teacher have been a part of a system placing this trauma on children. We need to recognize that it's not children's fault or families' fault.

Second, we should recognize that there is so much excellence happening among children. I witness it myself, walking into classrooms. But I've seen teachers completely ignore the brilliance of a child, particularly a Black child. Professional learning needs to help us do a mindset check.

We all have the same bias about Blackness. Part of our job is to be aware of our biases, and this is the moment to begin to work on that mind shift.

Professional learning could also do more to center race. The concept of color blindness has been so injurious to our communities. I want to say: See my color! See my experiences! See my joy and my brilliance!

That could help to change how teachers see children, the way they talk to children and families, and the kinds of opportunities they provide — especially for children who have historically been left behind or given less than.

Professional learning could also do more to center race. The concept of color blindness has been so injurious to our communities. I want to say: See my color! See my experiences! See my joy and my brilliance! I would like to see more professional learning embrace the idea that it's quite OK to see color and race, as long as you don't attribute deficiency to color.

But I also want to recognize that teachers are under enormous stress. They have way too much on their plates, and I want us to be cognizant of how much they are doing, not just in instruction but supporting families and acting as social workers, especially Black and Brown educators who have been

doing that extra work regardless of pay. I would like to see educators get fully compensated for everything they do. We just want to make sure at the same time that they're not causing any harm under the guise of good intentions.

Q: You mentioned some of the things children are learning at home during this COVID year. Why is it important for educators to pay attention to those assets, especially among Black families?

A: As someone who does a lot of national studies, I get it that there is going to be some loss this year in terms of school outcomes. But this idea that children are sitting at home getting dumber, that narrative is unfair to children. And it's insulting to families to suggest that they're not doing anything.

To say that they're not growing in so many ways is a disservice to children and to adults, especially Black people, who have struggled for so long to give their children an education. To discount the work and the toil is unfair. I hope the narrative changes to say to families, "What are you doing at home that's been great and that we can do together in a collective way to meet the needs of children as they go through school?" ■



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