



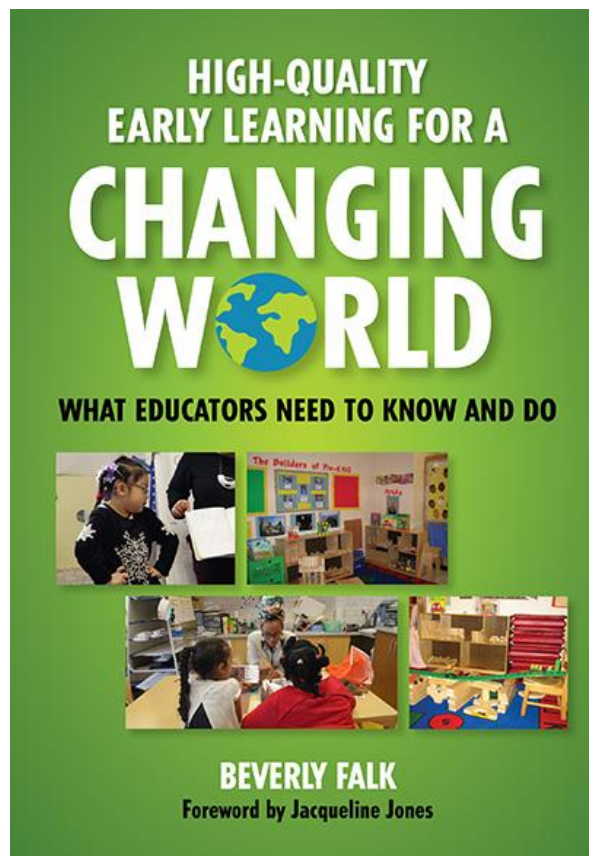
Falk, B. (2019). *High-quality early learning for a changing world: What educators need to know and do*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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Reviewed by Tess M. Dussling
Saint Michael's College
United States

The early years of a child's life are the building blocks for development, with the first five years often viewed as the most critical period for developing many lifelong foundational skills. These early years shape a child's future learning, happiness, and growth. Child development experts indicate that it is during this crucial time that children develop linguistic, cognitive, and social skills that predict later abilities (Trawick-Smith, 2014). There has been an increasing awareness about the importance of high-quality early childhood education experiences, as well as the need to support both children and families in a rapidly changing world. While high-quality early instructional practices are the goals for all childhood educators, we may not always know what exactly these practices should look like. In *High-Quality Early Learning for a Changing World: What Educators Need to Know and Do*, Beverly Falk walks educators through what high-quality instructional practices should look like and how they can be accomplished with all learners, especially those who may be in traditionally underserved communities.



Like many teacher educators, I am constantly searching for accessible methods books that connect theory and research to practice. This concise, yet informative book, is divided into three sections: (1) Foundational Knowledge to Guide Teaching; (2) Learning, Curriculum, and Assessment; and (3) Strategies for Supporting Children's Learning. In each section, Falk presents real-life examples of high-quality early childhood instruction while providing the reader with a clear rationale for what was done and why. Throughout this guide, Falk weaves in knowledge from her own 40+ years in childhood education with research findings from various disciplines such as cognitive and developmental psychology, neuroscience, and language and culture studies. The text is easy to follow, with detailed descriptions of early childhood learning settings. Early childhood educators and pre-service early childhood educators will enjoy reading this book because it explores relevant issues such as play, book sharing, daily routines, classroom management, and building on children's strengths.

Falk has made four major contributions in this volume. First and foremost is her use of concrete examples that show the reader how theory and practice are interwoven in real-life early childhood education settings. Rather than being presented with hypothetical situations, the reader is introduced to five early childhood teachers and is offered a glimpse into their classrooms. The descriptions of teachers and early learning settings in the appendix are from a study supported by the Foundation for Child Development that took place between 2015 and 2018. Through these classroom depictions, as well as in other descriptions of high-quality instruction, she acknowledges the real-life issues and obstacles faced by teachers, something not always seen in methods books. For example, when sharing the benefits of interdisciplinary curriculum studies, Falk recognizes that many teachers are required to use predesigned curricula. She offers

suggestions for how teachers can strengthen these programs by "joining with the learner" (p. 61) to make connections between new information and children's previous experiences and knowledge.

When presenting examples of high-quality teaching and ways to promote child-directed learning, the author also notes how changes in curriculum and instructional strategies require time and flexibility. In one example of child-directed learning, Falk introduces Fanny, a kindergarten teacher from Flushing, Queens, New York. The chapter details how Fanny nurtures learning through inquiry and play by allowing children the opportunity to select from various centers such as block building, dramatic play, and sand-water investigations. The reader then learns about whole-class inquiry projects based on the children's interests. Large photographs of an aviation inquiry project show an investigative chart, aviation books, airport play, and an author study chart. Similarly, another chapter focuses on Yvonne, a pre-K teacher in East Harlem, New York. The curriculum in her class is created by teacher observations and student interest. In one unit, the students studied change by observing how objects such as leaves, pumpkins, and apples change over time.

The book is as much a visual resource as it is a written one. The photographs in these chapters and throughout the rest of the book help bring the descriptions of early learning settings to life. These visual representations help reinforce concepts and instructional practices by giving the reader a chance to see various learning centers, classroom maps, classroom charts, and examples of work done by children. Additionally, some chapters include links to online videos and additional photographs.

A second major contribution of this book is Falk's unwavering stance that educators must find strengths in all children and must believe that all children can learn.

Falk repeatedly discusses the importance of understanding the cultural contexts of all students and knowing what “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) the children, as well as their families, bring to the classroom community. Children bring with them a range of experiences and variety of prior knowledge, and it is imperative for educators to understand that children’s prior experiences can impact how they learn. Falk reminds us that the “key to being a responsive educator is to find the strengths each child brings to the learning enterprise” and outlines ways early childhood educators can support development and learning for all students (p. 128).

Building on the work of Paulo Freire (2005), Falk stresses that effective teachers must constantly observe and listen to students in a nonjudgmental way to truly understand who the students are and how they think. These types of observation enable a teacher to make appropriate instructional decisions and help guide student inquiry. Falk also weaves throughout the book the importance of creating a caring community, highlighting how knowing the individual learners and creating home-school partnerships help children and families thrive.

A third contribution is the overall format and organization of the book. Each chapter has clear headings, subheadings, and visual supports. The book has 70 figures. Falk does an excellent job of connecting topics from one chapter to the next. The beginning of each chapter offers a brief recap of what has been covered and then transitions to the next topic. For example, in Chapter 1, Falk reports that while children grow and develop in varied ways, opportunities for active involvement and experiences can help all children learn. In the following chapter, Falk reminds the reader that “experience is the trigger that enables children

to organize their brains” before explaining the importance of varied activities and a classroom environment that encourages active learning (p. 15).

Finally, I appreciated that Falk included a section about “what it takes to make this kind of teaching happen” (p. 72). Throughout the book, the reader is shown examples of high-quality instruction that is needed to help all children learn. I can imagine that some of these examples and instructional outlines could be daunting to an educator, especially to one who has few resources to work with. Falk states that this type of high-quality instruction is possible in diverse school settings, and that the teachers depicted throughout the book are proof of this possibility. Notably, she also acknowledges the importance of supporting teachers. To teach in the ways described in the book, “we need to invest in building teachers’ capacities to craft instruction that is responsive to children and their diverse ways of learning” (p. 73). With increasingly diverse student populations and demanding student learning objectives, it is critical for teachers to become equipped with the knowledge and skills to help make them successful in the classroom.

High-Quality Early Learning for a Changing World is a well-written resource for early childhood educators and those studying to be early childhood educators. This succinct and accessible guide provides foundational knowledge for preK-2 teachers, while focusing on improving instructional practices and implementing high-quality education for our youngest students. High-quality early learning experiences for children are possible because of highly-qualified early childhood educators. Readers will learn what it means to be a high-quality early childhood educator and why this work is so very important in developing the cognitive and social skills needed for children to be successful in school and in the future.


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About the Reviewer

Tess Dussling, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of education at Saint Michael's College, where she teaches literacy methods and education research courses. Her research interests include early reading interventions, prevention and remediation of reading difficulty, and how to best meet the literacy needs of children who are struggling with reading (particularly English language learners).



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