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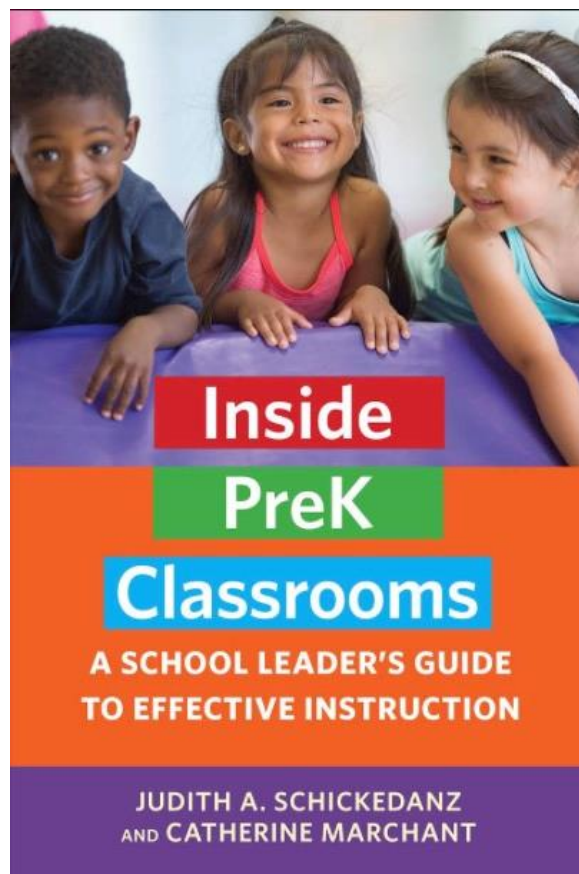
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While over 50% of elementary principals report that they have pre-kindergarten classes in their schools, only one in five consider themselves well-trained in developmentally appropriate instructional methods for early childhood (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2018). As a former early childhood teacher and elementary administrator, I do not think the importance of educational leadership can be overstated. In *Inside PreK Classrooms: A School Leader's Guide to Effective Instruction*, authors Schickedanz and Marchant provide compelling evidence that campus-level leadership is the most critical factor for the quality of instruction and a primary influence on children's learning. *Inside PreK Classrooms* provides specific guidance on how instructional leaders can support teaching and learning with grounded examples for various practitioners seeking to produce more effective early learning practices for pre-kindergarten students.

The authors bring considerable collective expertise on leadership in early childhood settings. Dr. Judith Schickedanz is a leader in



early childhood education and Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) and has developed numerous curriculums and programs. Dr. Catherine Marchant has contributed to the field through practitioner work as a teacher, coach, and administrator, with additional roles in curriculum development and consulting. In this volume, they present a comprehensive guide for principals and other educational leaders on how to successfully observe, support, and provide meaningful feedback and professional development for preschool and pre-kindergarten educators. Their text is also appropriate for school leaders, coaches, and early childhood educators ready to understand their work more deeply or through a different lens.

Schickedanz and Marchant guide readers through DAP across various social and academic constructs. The text is divided into five parts, covering topics from educational environments and behavior management to implications and suggestions for school leaders. Each part includes an introduction that articulates its purpose, provides historical context for how policy or practice has changed over time, and states why these concepts are essential for educational leaders. For example, when introducing the section on how young children think, the authors explain the fallacy of judging preschoolers as too young to grasp abstract concepts or make inferences. They then give grounded examples of what abstraction looks like for preschoolers, as it undeniably looks differently from the thinking of more mature students. At this age, children are beginning to attach concrete figures with corresponding symbols, such as the quantity “four” being represented by the symbol “4”. Once children make that connection, they may then expand the same understanding of “four” to novel experiences. This exemplar overview closes with a description of this pedagogical knowledge, its origins, and why this kind of knowledge is important for

teachers. Each part of the book follows a similar structure, and covers topics such as classroom environment and behavior management, learning through play, literacy development, and a focus on leadership.

In each chapter, the authors also begin with a classroom anecdote, sometimes prefaced by contextual information. Each anecdote features what is generally considered common, or even best, practices for early childhood educators. For example, despite best intentions, adults and skilled teachers are often unaware of how their benign words or actions impact children’s learning. To highlight this point, the authors feature the following anecdote: a teacher entered a socio-dramatic play area where a child was cooking breakfast and asked him questions about where the eggs he was cooking came from (pp. 55-56). While she likely thought that she was teaching the origin of his breakfast as chickens on a farm, she derailed the child’s dramatic play through questions that did not support his theme. Following such anecdotes, the authors then offer four research-informed modes of play in which adults can engage with children for various purposes as appropriate responses to child-led learning. Early childhood teachers are responsible for facilitating the development of young children holistically and can often teach and promote learning through play.

Part III focuses on literacy development, which is imperative for those beginning to teach or lead; yet, pre-reading skills have historically dominated the instructional focus within pre-kindergarten. Chapters in this section give detailed accounts of why some previously assumed best-practices do not go into the depth that children need to develop 21st-century skills. Phonological awareness and other literacy skills are taught in isolation in many literacy programs, creating obstacles to print reading and balanced literacy instructional approaches. Rather, Schickedanz and Marchant indicate

that there should be some fluidity in instruction based on student needs for holistic literacy development. This critical perspective addresses a research-to-practice gap, with additional literature referenced as support. For instance, after describing her own son's early writing experiences, Schickedanz noted his need to understand the alphabetic principle in addition to receiving phonological awareness instruction. For curious readers, Treiman et al.'s (1998) work on letter-sound learning in early literacy is referenced, along with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset work and practitioner-friendly article on developing motivation to address the whole child (Dweck, 2007). The authors follow this practice throughout the book, providing references to studies and reports that readers can investigate, which puts quality research into the hands of practitioners.

The final section utilizes vignettes of three school principals that may be helpful for most practitioners working in school environments. These school leaders present a range of familiar personas that are described through a powerful narrative. The first seemingly did not fully understand early learning constructs and expressed concern mostly with academic achievement. The second was challenged to implement meaningful professional development for pre-kindergarten teachers and worked with Marchant as a consultant to better meet teachers' needs. Successful plans were made with the latter using a distributed leadership model. Finally, the third principal was aware that her pre-kindergarten students and teachers have distinct needs from the other grade levels. After a recent campus expansion to include pre-kindergarten, this leader did not have the time or money to provide more appropriate support but was willing to go through the work to create inclusion for the students and teachers. This principal was someone who clearly wanted

what is best for kids and led the school by example with collaborative effort.

Throughout the text, the authors articulate the importance of informed and supportive leadership for the development of teachers and students. With 77% of elementary principals ever having taught at the elementary level, and 34.5% having served as assistant principals before becoming a principal (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2018), many school administrators may not fully understand their role in leading early childhood classrooms. The downward push of curriculum, standards, and instructional expectations over time have impacted preschool and pre-kindergarten classrooms, but teachers and leaders should not fret. With intentional professional development for both teachers and leaders, meaningful collaboration through vertical teams and alignment, and mutual understanding of each other's needs, principals and teachers can work in harmony to support our youngest learners' growth. One tool authors recommend for evaluation of classroom contexts as a whole is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, 2008). Using this observation protocol, leaders can observe through the lens of teacher-student interactions rather than specific curriculum or standards. If leaders and teachers received training on this or a similar tool for a common purpose of enhancing academic outcomes through emotional and instructional support, it would be constructive for coaching and ultimately lead to deeper student learning.

While the major takeaways of this book are explicitly for school administrators, those inside the classroom would also benefit from reading this book or participating in a book study with their peers. When discussing ways to improve communication channels, Schickedanz and Marchant detail a disagreement between a teacher and school leader in which neither party was adequately

prepared to debate their stance on early literacy development. Teachers might use this as a call to action to know the research and its value in providing justification and evidence for their practices. Likewise, it is the onus of leaders to serve all students and teachers, not just those that are included in accountability ratings.

The authors offer numerous nuggets of wisdom that many teachers and principals may not know or have forgotten over time. In alignment with much of the literature on early learning, this text favors pre-reading skills and literacy development over early mathematics instruction and learning. Research has shown, however, that early mathematics better predicts future academic achievement than early reading ability (Duncan et al., 2007), and a more balanced instructional approach would support learning across domains. Centers that focus on construction can be used for spatial reasoning, and science and math centers can combine for early STEM education. When there are instructional opportunities embedded in the classroom for mathematics, administrators or teacher leaders can encourage the use of flexible activities to enhance these critical skills. For example, supplementing activities such as water table

can serve as an introduction to engineering concepts when supplied with adequate tubing, funnels, and connectors (pp. 34-35). This practical classroom application also addresses the relative dearth of STEM in early education. Practitioners should be aware of the implications for promoting early literacy over math and find ways to incorporate each with the other. Though literacy is emphasized in *Inside PreK Classrooms*, the authors attend to the importance of both content areas.

In sum, to best facilitate the development of pre-kindergarten teachers and students, principals and administrators should lead by example. Two chief aspects of educational leadership involve demonstrating proficiency in practice and a willingness to learn. These few years in early childhood serve as a springboard for the rest of children's education; it is the moral imperative of teachers and leaders to embrace research and practice together for the benefit of all students. The authors of *Inside PreK Classrooms* provide tools to help both parties at various stages of their careers. Book sections can be used in isolation for quick fixes and off-the-shelf ideas, or the text could be read in entirety for deeper understanding across domains.

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