As the early learning field seeks to develop a coherent birth through third grade early learning system, one issue that needs to be addressed is the chasm experienced by many kindergarten educators in this country. Caught between the worlds of academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), districts can leverage the whole child focus of organizations like ASCD and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to marry these divorced concepts and more effectively prepare children to be successful in school and beyond.

By addressing the rigor-DAP divide, educators will be freed from the incoherent expectations that result in a push down of expectations and be better equipped to help children learn the skills and concepts that are necessary for the world of today.

Unlike many initiatives that educators experience, a focus on educating the whole child opens the door to correcting the well-intentioned, but ill-conceived practices we adopted to meet the proficiency-driven demands of initiatives such as No Child Left Behind. Among them, a pendulum swing toward focusing kindergarten on the development of first grade competencies – often at the exclusion of teaching practices that allowed children to play with ideas and peers, to make mistakes and try again, to persist and accomplish, to be focused and engaged. In short, this push down that kindergarten educators have experienced deprives them of the space to fuse academic and social development.

What would the fusing of academic and social development look like? From an administrative perspective, when observing a kindergarten class, an administrator would see a classroom filled with children deeply engaged in meaningful activities and projects. Some children will be making mistakes, some children will be assisting peers, and all children will have the opportunity to play with ideas. In fact, play serves as the catalyst for deep engagement and creates the space for the type of learning that we know is critical to building a foundation for long term success – academic and otherwise.
Unfortunately, many educators have come to imagine a rigorous kindergarten curriculum that is guided by the mantra that harder is better. That worksheets, checklists, sentence starters and highly programmed daily and weekly schedules designed to maximize every moment of student time is optimal. This approach not only hinders the ways in which children are able to display their understanding of crucial concepts, but deprives them of the opportunities to take initiative, problem solve, and persist on tasks. These are precisely the skills that children will rely on to be successful for their entire school experience as well as in life.

Perhaps we shouldn’t wait until children are in high school to communicate clearly and effectively, utilize critical thinking, or work productively in groups with peers. If we choose to wait, we may never reach the depth that is necessary to develop robotics teams, anti-bullying initiatives or the implementation of Next Generation Science Standards in ways that make sense to children, educators, and families.

“The whole child is about all achievement, not some achievement, and about the needs of the child in the present as they prepare for life in the future.”
Andy Hargreaves, Chair
Lynch School of Education
Boston College

However, a whole child focus creates an opportunity for a strengthening of kindergarten that supports educators in marrying the divorced concepts of academic rigor and DAP. It presents an opportunity to refocus the interactions between teachers and children to those that are play-based, interdisciplinary, and worthy of doing. In this rubber-meets-the-road moment, let us leverage the whole child focus to lift kindergarten educators into a world that supports learning and makes sense.

To learn more about the entire early learning continuum and rigorous and appropriate practices in kindergarten, New Jersey ASCD hosts an Early Learning Summit on February 5, 2018 at the Forsgate Country Club in Monroe Township, New Jersey. Plan now to join colleagues in shaping teaching and learning experiences with the young child in mind!