

# **Joining with the Learner: A Strategy for Strengthening Early Childhood Education**

Beverly Falk, Nancy Gropper & Rima Shore  
NYC Early Childhood Exchange

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Early childhood educators bring diverse perspectives, ideas, and beliefs to their work, based on their own life histories, their professional training and experiences, their roles, and the missions and cultures of their organizations. This is certainly true of a group of New York City professionals who have gathered in recent years to dialogue across organizational and sectoral boundaries about how to strengthen quality and equity in the city's early childhood settings.

This group – now known as the NYC Early Childhood Exchange – has organized two convenings, bringing together practitioners and policymakers from a broad cross-section of organizations and roles. In many hours of conversation, we found that we share a compelling conviction – one theory of action that is central to the field:

**A shared focus on building practitioners' capacity to *join with the learner* – that is, to notice, connect with, and respond to children's strengths, understandings, interests, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds – is a key to high quality in early education.**

This paper unpacks the concept of joining with the learner (JWTL), reflecting the wide range of ideas and strategies raised at the convenings. It presents a five-point call to action.

## **JWTL in Theory**

The idea of joining with the learner is not new. Like most important principles, it emerged and evolved over time through a convergence of research by scholars, theorists, and practitioners working across diverse disciplines. It was embedded in the child study movement of the early 1900s that viewed the observation of children as the key to understanding how they develop and learn. Among the early proponents of observation as a scientific method of inquiry was Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of Bank Street College of Education, who along with her colleague, Barbara Biber, stressed the need to achieve a deep understanding of the “whole” child – a thinking, feeling, acting being whose needs and interests must be addressed if schools are to effectively support development (1987).

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Beginning in the 1970s, psychologist Jerome Bruner developed the concept of “joint attention.” In particular, he studied the ways that joint attention affects learning in the early years, observing that language development is more rapid and robust when adults name the objects that have already attracted children’s notice, rather than naming objects to which they wish to draw children’s attention (1985). He later extended this notion to encompass a “meeting of the minds” (1995) between an adult and a child – connecting with young learners to help them experience their own agency, thus offering them deeper, more engaging, more nuanced ways of knowing the world and themselves.

Educator Lillian Weber described “joining with the learner” as part of a set of essential teaching practices: inquiring, noticing, joining with, and following after (1991). For her, the term denoted what a caregiver, teacher, or clinician does to ensure that the learning or support offered to children is informed by and responsive to their understandings and interests as well as their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It meant closely observing what children look at, where their curiosity leads them, how they make sense of what they are learning, and what feelings they express while doing so. Joining with the learner also included creating opportunities that extend and deepen children’s experiences and tapping experiences that are relevant to their lives at home and in their communities. Whether the professional is teaching, caregiving, or providing other essential services, the key is close observation of and connection to those being served.

More recently, neuroscientists have described “serve and return” (2004) – a process of observing and responding between child and adult that is essential to healthy development. Neuroscientific research bears out what earlier theorists and educators, including Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, had established: that young children learn in the context of active involvement and important relationships, and that adults’ responsiveness to children’s backgrounds, interests, and needs supports social, emotional, and cognitive growth.

While these educators and theorists based their work on studies of young children, JWTL is an effective strategy for working with learners of all ages.

### **JWTL in practice: Teachers**

As phrased at our early childhood convening, the key idea is this: **Learners of all ages teach you how to teach them, if you carefully listen and watch.**

Whether in home-based care, infant/toddler programs, preK settings, or the primary grades, joining with the learning child begins with the act of noticing how she is making sense of her experiences as well as the kinds of objects, experiences, ideas, or interactions that attract, interest, or engage her. Noticing is only the first step however. Joining with the learner also means that the educator then responds by creating or extending opportunities for each child to explore interests and deepen understandings.

Similarly the education of adult learners, especially those who work with or parent young children, is enhanced when principles of JWTL are followed. By observing adults' interactions with children, and by assessing and supporting their understandings and practices, teacher educators and parent educators can model and extend adult learners' capacity to notice, respond to, and nurture children's growth. They can help practitioners gain awareness of the infinite variety of children's strengths and abilities, while heightening sensitivity to the ways in which lenses of gender, race, language, culture, family structure, and household income can influence what we see.

In school settings, joining with the learner involves much more than following a curriculum (no matter how well designed it may be). Rather, it means making sure that the curriculum is informed and shaped by input from learners. It means meeting learners where they are and offering the guidance they need to further develop their skills and deepen their understandings.

**The capacity to join with the learner develops throughout a teacher's career.**

This work is challenging, even in ideal contexts. Yet most teachers, especially in New York City, are in settings where they are called upon to respond to the multiple needs and strengths of

children from diverse backgrounds, while also taking into account families' input and concerns. No matter the setting, however, the teacher's capacity to join with the learner heightens the possibility that effective learning and development will take place.

Learning how to do this begins in teacher education, but the capacity to engage in JWTL develops throughout a teacher's career. To achieve increasingly higher levels of mastery, all of the educators in early childhood classrooms – teachers, assistant teachers, and paraprofessionals – must be continuously inspired, nurtured, and supported.

### **JWTL in practice: Teacher educators and leaders**

The people who prepare, supervise, and coach teachers of young children therefore have crucial roles to play. It is up to them to ensure that teachers have the preparation, resources, and ongoing professional development that they need to support and extend children's learning.

Teacher educators and coaches need to ground their work in understandings of children's development, and to make observing, recording, and reflecting on children's work a central part of their programs. With knowledge of these practices, teachers will be able to shape curricula and use instructional strategies that respond to children's and families' needs, strengths, and interests.

School and district leaders and administrators need to continuously examine their expectations. What might they be doing to highlight and honor JWTL practices in early childhood classrooms? How might they build more flexibility into curricular frameworks and pacing schedules, making it easier for early childhood educators to teach in ways that connect to the understandings and interests of their young students? Could they introduce or strengthen professional development and coaching designed to build on educators' capacity to join with the learner? In the process, can they do more to support teachers to acknowledge and respond to the personal, cultural, language, and community assets of the children in their classrooms?

### **JWTL in practice: Policymakers and system-builders**

Supporting JWTL is not just about transactions between adults and children; it is also about the systems and organizational cultures that support early learning. Capacity for JWTL hinges on systems, policies and structural supports that keep the child at the center and give programs the flexibility to differentiate their practices: assessment systems that provide authentic information about what children know and can do and that are used to inform and strengthen teaching; professional development initiatives that nurture teachers to be thinkers who connect to the diverse learners in their classrooms; contracts and schedules that give educators time to document, reflect on, and discuss individual children's needs, strengths, and interests.

**JWTL is also about the systems and organizational cultures that support early learning.**

### **Call to action: Five keys to progress**

As a concept, JWTL has the power to motivate and unify professionals from all corners of New York City's sprawling early childhood enterprise. As a set of practices and policies geared to practitioners, site leaders, policymakers, and system-builders, it has the potential to improve quality and equity in early learning programs across the city. Our call to action – which envisions expanded, intensified efforts around JWTL – reflects the views expressed by participants in our convenings. It includes:

- Identifying effective educational practices for children from birth through grade 3 that comprise JWTL in 21<sup>st</sup> century settings – practices that hold promise for nurturing diverse young learners' skills and deepening their understandings.
- Spelling out teaching, coaching, and supervisory practices that make up JWTL, and how they can be recognized, developed, and assessed.
- Understanding and implementing the conditions and supports that lead to more consistent use of these practices in various contexts, including: higher education (teacher education curricula and clinically rich

- experiences, including student teaching residencies); classroom practices/environments; coaching; supervision; and professional development.
- Analyzing the impact of current policies and system-building efforts on the capacity of early childhood practitioners (teachers, teaching assistants, paraprofessionals, coaches, leaders) to join with their learners and work effectively with learners' families.
  - Facilitating ongoing dialogue among early childhood educators and planners about unexamined assumptions or competing priorities that may stand in the way of implementing JWTL, so that they can be addressed and overcome.

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*The following members of the NYC Early Childhood Exchange have signed onto this paper:*

Takiema Bunche Smith, University Settlement  
Virginia Casper, Graduate Faculty, Bank Street College of Education  
Kelvin Chan, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
Sherry Cleary, New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute  
Amy Dombro, Early Childhood Consultant

Laura Ensler, Educational Consultant  
Beverly Falk, The City College of New York  
Nancy Gropper, Graduate Faculty (retired), Bank Street College of Education  
Noah Hichenberg, Director, Saul and Carole Zabar Nursery School, JCC  
Manhattan  
Faith Lamb-Parker, Bank Street College of Education  
Peggy McNamara, Bank Street College of Education  
Maimuna Mohammed, Early Childhood Educator  
Adriana Reis, NYC Division of Early Childhood Education, Manhattan/Bronx Field  
Office  
Rima Shore, Graduate Faculty (retired), Bank Street College of Education  
Lisa Wenz, Director, Amalgamated Nursery School