

Characteristics of Primary Learners

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children. Nelson Mandela

EL Education's commitment to igniting each student's motivation, persistence, and compassion guides us to lift up best practices that complement the ways people learn most naturally. Young children's inherent capacities can be harnessed in service of our goal of developing deep thinkers, lifelong learners, compassionate community members, and creative future leaders.

This document highlights the unique needs and strengths of typical young children, identifying eleven key characteristics of primary learners¹ – their ways of thinking and engaging with the world and their remarkable hunger for learning. Each of these characteristics is based on the writings of developmental psychologists and educators such as Lev Vygotsky, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget, as well as recent peer-reviewed research and the experience of primary educators in our EL network.

Each section below names a quality of primary learners that should guide curriculum design, instructional practice and culture in our primary classrooms. Specific teaching strategies and adaptations of our Core Practices derived from these developmental characteristics of young learners are described in other current and forthcoming documents in EL Commons.

Young children find security in rhythm, ritual, and repetition.

Try to explain to the four- or five-year-old a "tomorrow," or a "yesterday," or even to wait until "later." For the child time is "now." Burton Rod

Primary students live in the present tense. They experience the flow of time in the rhythms of the day, the week and the year. They do not relate to the abstract symbol of hands on a clock to know "when" they are. A feeling of order and independence is established in the consistent patterns of their schedule. Children love the predictability of repeating stories, songs, and activities. They delight in the rhymes, meters and alliterations of language. They feel a sense of security and control as they live through the recurring rhythms of the school day, anticipate the special traditions of the week, and celebrate the annual festivals of the year.

Young children learn through play.

Play is the highest form of research. Albert Einstein

Primary students are masters of play. One of the most important indicators of a species' intelligence is the behavior of its young – all intelligent animals play (Ackerman, 1999). Primary learners are at an age where learning capacity and brain development are at their peak, and nature has given them the drive to maximize that power with its best learning tool – play. It is no surprise that children prefer acting and interacting to listening passively. It's how they are designed. Play is the context within which primary students can develop vital skills that are harder to practice in more structured formats – complex decision-making, leadership, and

¹ NAEYC defines "early childhood" as birth to age 8. These Characteristics of Primary Learners were written with Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten especially in mind, but they are relevant to 1st and 2nd grade practice (and beyond!).

executive functioning. It invites the “having of wonderful ideas.” Play also builds the foundation for abstract representational thinking – a rag on a stick becomes a flag, just as a set of squiggles on a page stands for a word. Play encourages children to create and narrate their own worlds, grapple with the challenges most urgent to them, and gain experience negotiating alliances, roles, and strategies with their peers. Encouraging play in the classroom, and strategically harnessing its power for specific learning purposes allows for authentic engagement and deep learning opportunities for our youngest students.

Young children want to belong to a community that is safe, beautiful, and good.

In the early childhood class, the art of education is the art of living. Susan Howard

Primary students seek to belong. More important than any curriculum or instruction is a culture of love, warmth, and beauty. Children are keen observers of the environment and adult behavior - what they see when they walk into the classroom, how they are greeted by their teacher and classmates, and how they perceive social interactions all have a profound effect on their sense of belonging (Howard, 2006). A strong relationship with an adult in the classroom is especially critical for young students to feel safe. The teacher’s love, care, and thoughtfulness are evident in the organization of the classroom, the display of beautiful student work, and the quality of the materials for expression, learning, and play. Classroom communities celebrating acts of kindness and respectfully resolving conflict reinforce a sense of justice and good will. Singing and dancing together create a language of unity that young children understand - a sense of safety in a community that is greater than any individual member. Feeling secure in a kind and beautiful classroom creates a strong inner foundation for the development of young children's academic and relational character.

Young children explore the world with wonder.

Except for children (who don't know enough not to ask the important questions), few of us spend time wondering why nature is the way it is. Carl Sagan

Younger learners are always asking questions. They hunger to make discoveries, to find answers that will help them make meaning of the world around them. They ask questions not to annoy or interrupt, but to pursue their inherent drive to learn. Much like scientists, they develop hypotheses and test them, incorporating their findings and often retesting and modifying their theories over time –the foundations of logical reasoning. Children love to develop deep expertise - naming obscure dinosaurs, explaining the workings of a toy, or playing “teacher” with precision of gesture and speech. Guiding this relentless curiosity in the direction of students’ academic growth without squelching it is a primary teacher’s greatest challenge. By joining students in the inquiry process and creating rich opportunities for discovery, for building deep expertise, and for sharing that new knowledge, teachers are able to harness the “engine” of children’s natural learning predispositions to power their success in the classroom.

Young children “understand” the world first through their bodies.

I move, therefore I am. Haruki Murakami

Children are born to move. They explore the world with their bodies, particularly their senses, before they process it with their minds. They learn best when their bodies are fully engaged. Because of busy family schedules, limited access to the outdoors, and the allure of electronic devices, children need opportunities to develop their physical senses, the five we all know, plus others such

as balance and proprioception (the sense of one's body in space). Occupational therapy researchers have documented the strong connections between sensory development and academic success (Flanagan, 2009). Cognitive skills and literacy are built on a foundation of sensory integration. EL primary teachers find ways to develop the senses through playful movement, and to link learning with physical activity. They invite children to explore complex concepts first through movement, then through feelings, and finally in thought.

Young children seek independence and mastery.

Never help a child with a task at which he feels he can succeed. Maria Montessori

Primary learners seek to assert power and gain control over their world (Erikson, 1959). They take great pride in accomplishing independent tasks – tying their shoes, building a tower, or caring for seedlings. Primary children look to adults to model the skills and attitude required to gain independence, imitating and practicing what they observe through pretend as well as “real” work. They long for challenging, meaningful, authentic work. When they find it, they engage with great perseverance, a sense of craftsmanship, and joyful purpose. They delight in sharing and celebrating their accomplishments with others, through speaking, writing/dictation, art, music or drama. When teachers take children's work seriously and design environments and activities that promote autonomy and mastery, they allow their students to take ownership of their learning.

Young children thrive in the natural world

If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it. David Sobel

Children experience order, beauty, and diversity in the natural world. The outdoors beckons them with an endless variety of flowers, trees and fascinating creatures – in the woods behind the school, or the cracks in the asphalt playground. Nature offers opportunities for the pre-literacy skills of close observation and detailed questioning. Students experience risk-taking adventure, from holding an earthworm to conquering a big hillside, and evaluate risk as they grapple with success and failure - Can I climb that tree? Can I jump over that stump? Spending time in the outdoors creates a context for self-discovery. It fosters a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself and participation in the interdependent web of life. The natural world inspires reverence and wonder, an essential foundation for learning. Bringing nature indoors and children outdoors fills important developmental and human needs.

Young children use stories to construct meaning

The head does not hear anything until the heart has listened. The heart knows today what the head will understand tomorrow. James Stephens

In all cultures throughout history, humans have used stories to give meaning to events, to express their values, fears and hopes. In the oral culture of young children, stories provide the cognitive structure to explore big ideas and express deep emotions. Telling their own stories helps children to organize and sequence information, and communicate their thoughts and feelings – from the simple tale of what happened on the playground, to the complex explanation of why it rains. Narrative development in the primary years is a strong predictor of success in reading and writing. (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). They develop moral imagination through the feelings generated by classic fairy tales and legends from around the world – a love for what is good and beautiful, empathy for the oppressed, loathing of the bully and the cheater. Children readily understand content when it is

organized into story form. Primary students learn vocabulary and syntax through stories, and create foundational schemas of organization, sequence and causation. Their memory is stimulated by rhythm, rhyme and repetition. Imagination is developed as children create vivid images of story settings and characters in their own minds. Story and metaphor clothe abstract concepts in developmentally appropriate “language” enabling students to explore big ideas and make meaning from experience.

Young children seek patterns in the world around them.

Children's learning begins long before they enter school ... They have had to deal with operations of division, addition, subtraction, and the determination of size. Lev Vygotsky

Primary students search for patterns in everything they observe. Seeking order in their surroundings, they notice the angles in a brick walkway or the flowers that can be made from diamond shaped play tiles. They sort and quantify and measure nearly everything around them – announcing the height of a block tower, separating the colors in a bag of M&Ms, comparing the size of their brownie to a sibling’s, or counting the number of caterpillars fallen from the playground tree. Learning to communicate mathematical ideas visually and verbally is an inherently exciting challenge. Similarly, finding order in the structure of words and language delights young learners. They discover letters of their names in street signs, notice refrains in songs, and patterns of rhyme and alliteration in poetry and prose. Listening for and affirming pattern discoveries and helping students to name, create, and manipulate patterns is a key part of the work of the early primary teacher.

Young children construct their identities and build cultural bridges.

There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots, the other, wings.
Henry Ward Beecher

Nearly all children travel between cultures when they travel from home to school. For some the cultural differences are more dramatic than for others - different foods, different words, different unconscious patterns of body language, different fundamental values. Primary students are remarkably adept at learning the new culture of school but are also particularly vulnerable to unspoken negative messages about the values, language, and traditions of their home culture. At an age when identity as part of a family group and as a unique self are in transition, children need to see their home culture reflected positively in their school experience (Brooker and Whitehead, 2008). They also need affirmation of their developing gender identities (Park and Gauvaine, 2009), personal preferences, and unique strengths. Because children develop at different rates, skilled primary teachers find ways to affirm the abilities and preferences of each of their students, to celebrate diversity and encourage inclusion. Embracing the distinct cultural identities and individual differences of students creates a solid foundation on which students can build bridges between their school community and their cultural and individual selfhood.

Young children express themselves in complex ways.

The child has a hundred languages, a hundred hands, a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking. Loris Malaguzzi

Primary students construct and express their understanding of the world around them in a variety of complex ways. They express their thoughts, emotions, questions, and needs through different modalities. A painting may describe a child’s experience visiting a relative, stacked blocks may represent a hospital; sketches, scribbles or wobbly letters may tell the story of sibling rivalry; and a song or dance may demonstrate a child’s understanding of the seasons. Young children express their

individuality and needs in the unconscious ways that they speak and move - in their posture, gesture, and tone of voice, in the way they walk or hold a pencil. By listening carefully to how children express themselves and encouraging them to represent their thinking in a variety of ways, we help them to build stronger foundations for literacy and mathematics, and to deepen connections with one another and with the world.

Conclusion

These eleven unique characteristics have deep implications for our practice as primary educators. In some cases, the needs of primary students are no different from those of any age - the need to belong, to express themselves, and to engage in challenging, meaningful work. In others, they invite an approach that emphasizes certain practices, adapts others in developmentally appropriate ways, or creates unique structures and tools to provide the foundation that will support cognitive and social flourishing as they mature. The caterpillar requires different nourishment than the butterfly. If we can harness primary students' natural strengths to develop their character, imagination, identity, and physical engagement, we are able to provide the optimal foundation for all students to become active contributors to building a better world and succeed in school, college, career, and life.

In Brief – Recapping the Characteristics of Primary Learners

- Young children find security in **rhythm, ritual, and repetition**.
- Young children learn through **play**.
- Young children want to **belong** to a community that is safe, beautiful, and good.
- Young children explore the world with **wonder**.
- Young children “understand” the world first through their **bodies**.
- Young children seek **independence and mastery**.
- Young children thrive in the **natural world**.
- Young children use **stories** to construct meaning.
- Young children seek **patterns** in the world around them.
- Young children construct their **identities** and build **cultural bridges**.
- Young children **express themselves** in complex ways.

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