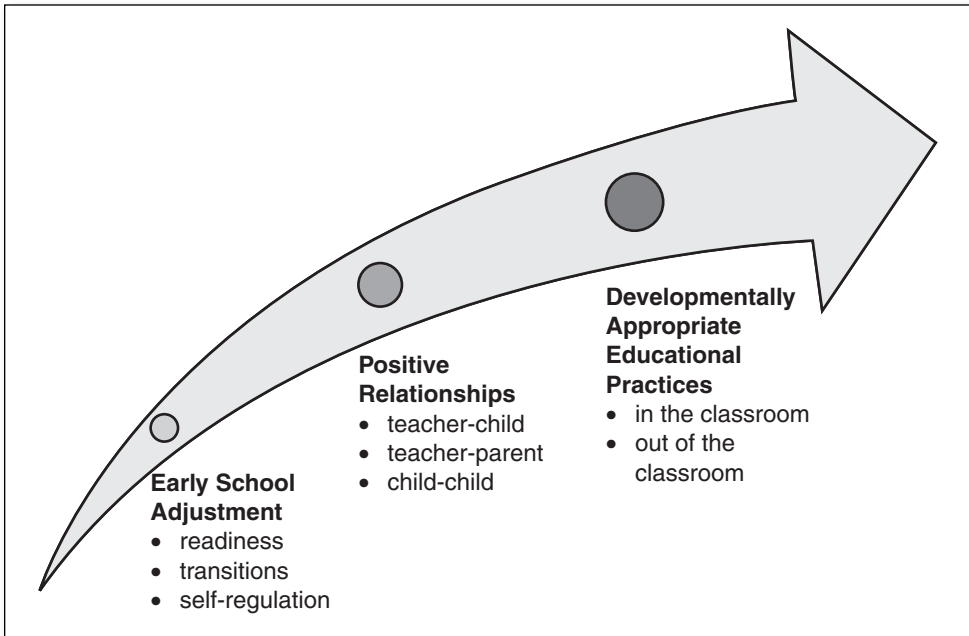# Introduction

The purpose of this book is to provide educators with a friendly introduction to some current ideas from research on child development and education for improving practices in the early school years. These years provide "windows of opportunity" for children to develop attitudes, learning approaches, and competencies essential for their future well-being and achievement in school. In the past two decades, educational and developmental psychologists and others have made great strides in understanding how to launch children onto positive developmental pathways through school (see topic areas in Figure 0.1). We also know more about how to help steer children away from negative pathways. We would like to share these insights with teachers and other child professionals because of the critical role that they play in this endeavor. Of course, others—such as parents, administrators, community members, policymakers—also play important roles, but we primarily focus on what classroom teachers can do to support children's learning and development. It is important to note that most of the recommendations made in this brief book have the typically developing child in mind; however, some attention is given to individual differences.

OBJECTIVES

The *Classroom Insights* series was created to help bridge the gap between current theory and research in educational and developmental psychology and classroom practice. The major

Figure 0.1   Promoting Positive Pathways Through School

Developmentally
Appropriate
Educational
Practices
• in the classroom
• out of the
  classroom

Positive
Relationships
• teacher-child
• teacher-parent
• child-child

Early School
Adjustment
• readiness
• transitions
• self-regulation

objective of this book is to expose practicing and prospective educators of children in preschool and the primary grades to some current advances in developmental research with implications for classroom practice. We hope teacher educators will also find this source useful. We want to encourage educators to do the following:

- *View children and teachers in the big picture:* Better understand major developmental changes in the child from early to middle childhood, typical changes in school contexts during these years, and how adult beliefs about development impact their interactions with children and the learning environments they create for them. Developmental knowledge is key to improving educational practices.

- *Foster children's adjustment and self-regulation:* Better understand the influence of child and classroom qualities on children's regulatory behaviors and their early school adjustment and how to facilitate smooth transitions to school and between grade levels.
- *Foster relationships:* Better understand the influence of teacher-child, child-child, and teacher-parent relationships on children's development and learning throughout the school years.
- *Foster learning in the classroom:* Better understand the influence of classroom climate, organization, and instructional practices on children's learning and development.
- *Connect learning out of the classroom:* Better understand children's learning and development in digital and natural environments.

Each of these topics is discussed in separate chapters introduced next. Each chapter provides brief background information from current research and theory and recommendations for practice.

OVERVIEW

We begin Chapter 1 with a brief overview of important developmental changes in children's thinking, feelings, behavior, and social relationships between four and eight years—the age range of interest in this book. Children show remarkable growth in all areas of development during these years, simply referred to as "the 5 to 7 developmental shift." In addition, they typically experience multiple changes in their environments, such as transitions to new schools and classrooms and increased expectations at home. Preschool and primary-grade teachers who understand these complex developmental changes from an ecological perspective are better prepared to guide the hearts and minds of children and provide secure and stimulating learning experiences for them.

In Chapter 2, we describe behaviors, skills, and attitudes that children develop in the early school years that appear to be critical for their adjustment and later achievements in school. Particular attention is given to the development of self-regulation skills. This chapter also includes information about how school practices and transitional activities affect children's adjustment. We also refer to some individual differences in children's abilities to adapt to school and provide some recommendations for responding to children who might be at risk for difficulties, such as those with aggressive or inhibited tendencies.

Chapter 3 focuses on the importance of developing positive relationships in school. Teachers' relationships with children not only influence children's current adjustment and learning but their relationships with peers and future teachers as well as subsequent school attitudes and achievement. In addition, teachers' relationships with parents play an important role in fostering family involvement in school and children's long-term adjustment and achievement. Recommendations for fostering positive relationships in school are provided on the basis of this research.

Chapter 4 provides a brief introduction to how young children's learning and development is influenced by the classroom climate, organization, and general instructional practices in preschool and primary grades. This approach is primarily based on social-constructivist perspectives of development, and it includes rationales for including play in school for optimal learning and well-being. Examples of high quality practices are provided. Other books in the *Classroom Insights* series will attend to specific practices and teaching of particular academic subjects.

Chapter 5 includes discussions about how children's experiences with technology and nature influence their learning and development and how teachers might connect to or extend these experiences.

The brief concluding chapter highlights the importance of implementing developmental approaches in the early school

years, as well as some of the challenges teachers face and how obstacles might be overcome.

Brief cases or vignettes from the classroom (*Window Into Practice, The Child's Window*) are threaded throughout the text to provide real-life connections and illustrations of the material presented in chapters. In addition, simple guidelines for observations and interviews are included in *Practice Exercises* to help readers connect content to live examples. *Summaries, Questions to Ponder,* and *Key Words* are provided at the end of each chapter for monitoring and enhancing comprehension.

The *Resources* section provides additional reflection tools and resources for prospective and practicing teachers and others. In *Resource A*, recommendations from the text are reproduced for a handy reference and include further suggestions for reflecting upon, improving, and monitoring practices; these can be adapted for a variety of purposes. *Resource B* provides descriptions of and links to major professional organizations and centers for obtaining resources, guides, and materials for implementing developmentally appropriate practices. *Resource C* introduces books with excellent practical suggestions and books with inspiring stories about real children and teachers in preschool and primary-grade classrooms. We hope that connecting developmental research to life in the classroom enlightens all of us with the passion for educating and improving the lives of young children.