

# The Words We Use

## A Glossary of Terms for Early Childhood Education Standards and Assessments

Jana Martella



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Sylvie Wickstrom

**Jana Martella, M.S.**, is the director of early childhood and family education for the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in Washington, D.C. She has 25 years of experience in education, including as a primary teacher and assistant administrator, legislative liaison, and state coordinator for federal programs. A central part of her work has focused on education system and program improvement through standards-based reform, including promoting improved opportunities in early childhood education.

The Early Childhood Education Assessment Consortium (ECEA) online glossary had its roots in the 2002 NAEYC Professional Development Leadership Institute, where participants gathered to discuss the draft joint position statement on standards being developed by NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (See [www.naeyc.org/resources/position\\_statements/creating\\_conditions.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/creating_conditions.asp).) Several participants noted that even the simplest words related to standards and assessments for young children are burdened with unclear meanings or different meanings, depending on who is considering them. Often, the glossaries so common at the end of education publications and articles also include multiple or conflicting definitions.

An informal group of enthused “lexicographers” agreed to take on the ambitious task of developing a glossary of key words related to standards and assessment for young children. They hoped to provide clarity for the field by creating a consensus listing of the most essential and relevant words and then linking the definitions of these words to resources for delving deeper into their meanings. With little support other than their own dedication, they gathered in Washington, D.C., in early August 2002.

Over the next several months, the dictionary developers winnowed down the list of terms to be defined, divided the labor, and fine-tuned a framework for the task. Realizing that the glossary could easily become daunting, from the beginning they were committed to limiting the scope of the task. The focus would be on early learning standards and assessments with a broad view of development. They expected that the resulting glossary would be dynamic, timely, and easily changed or updated, and therefore best suited to a Web-based format.

*The Words We Use: A Glossary of Terms for Early Childhood Education Standards and Assessments* is online at [www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary](http://www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary).

The team members spent a lot of time poring over dictionaries and glossaries—many related broadly to education, statistics, and assessment issues. They emerged with some interesting perspectives that informed the work. For example, a number of the words common to assessment can be traced to the move to standardize industry. *Benchmark*, for example, originally meant a notch in the wood (or mark on the bench) that designated progress on the assembly line. And many dictionaries include in the definition of *indicator* a reference to the needle in the valve that measures a production input like pressure or temperature.

The nature of such words—with early uses going back to this standardized assembly line—added impetus to the lexicographers’ desire to underscore and honor the individuality of young children as they assigned fresh meaning to the terminology of early childhood assessment. As the introduction to the glossary notes, it is designed to serve the needs of teachers, administrators, programs, and organizations in the array of programs and services that address the learning and developmental needs of America’s young children. The lexicographers also hoped to provide common ground for public discourse about standards and assessment, both within the field of early childhood education and with those outside the field.

Throughout their deliberations, the lexicographers pursued well-researched definitions and then subjected them to significant scrutiny. After several meetings, lots of e-mail, much telephone conferencing and conversation, and preliminary review among outside experts, *The Words We Use: A Glossary of Terms for Early Childhood Education Standards and Assessments* became a reality (see [www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary](http://www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary)). The lexicon defines 31 primary terms. Each definition is followed by a group of important related terms that enlarge the meaning of the primary word and provide a scaffold of additional information. In many cases the related terms are also defined and linked.

Among the powerful resources within the glossary are the Web and print links that tie the primary term to other academic and research-based definitions. These delineate the seminal sources from which the meaning was derived. A click of the mouse will allow the reader to explore the term in greater depth and compare the analysis in the glossary with those of other experts. The lexicographers decided that the glossary would not contain test measurement and statistical terms that have widely accepted meanings, such as *valid*, *reliable*, *norm*, and *standard score*. Likewise the glossary does not provide information on specific test instruments. However, comprehensive sources for this information are provided within the introduction, and the Web sites noted above will take the user to more technical information. Finally, the introduction to the online glossary offers the reader the opportunity to suggest additional terms to be defined.

The lexicographers hoped to link the field to the best in academic and scientific research around the terminology that frames early childhood education standards and assessments. The ultimate objective is to inform practice from that evidence and to ground it in our best understanding of what is most important and appropriate for our



A lion's share of credit for the glossary goes to Harriet Egertson, who was the early childhood specialist for the Nebraska Department of Education at the beginning of the project. Then, as an independent consultant, she provided leadership, coordination, expertise, and guidance, in addition to writing many of the definitions. Particular thanks are also owed to Susan Andersen, early childhood consultant in the Iowa Department of Education. Her energy as coordinator of the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Early Childhood Education Assessment State Collaborative on Assessment (ECEA-SCASS) helped initiate the effort. Finally, appreciation goes to Dianne Rothenberg, co-director of the Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative Information Technology Group; her energy and passion for words and their meanings contributed to the framework for the endeavor.

Additional information about ECEA-SCASS can be found at [www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_Assessment\\_Consortium/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early_Childhood_Education_Assessment_Consortium/) or by contacting Jana Martella, CCSSO's director of early childhood and family education, at [janam@ccsso.org](mailto:janam@ccsso.org).

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