

Standards

At the Heart of Educational Equity

Barbara T. Bowman

This article is an edited version of Barbara Bowman's keynote address to the NAEYC 15th National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development in San Antonio, June 2006.

Standards. What is their relevance to early childhood education? This is an important discussion, I believe, for standards are at the heart of educational equity.

In our field, there are different kinds of standards: for programs, content, learning or performance, and professional development. Here is my definition of each of these four kinds of standards.



Barbara T. Bowman, MA, is a professor at Erikson Institute in Chicago and chief officer, Office of Early Childhood Education, Chicago Public Schools. A past president of the Chicago AEYC and of NAEYC, she has been a teacher and teacher educator for more than 50 years.

1. Program standards are what I call input standards; they define what we need to put into the learning environment for children to flourish. These standards may include such things as the number of children in a group, the kind of activities the program provides for children, and the credential requirements for teachers and directors. They are designed to set the organizational structure for programs.

2. Content standards are also input standards and define the knowledge, concepts, and skills to be taught at each age or grade level. Curriculum is aligned with content standards and sets forth the activities into which the standards are embedded. For example, for preschool the standards might list the alphabet, fine motor coordination, and following directions as content to be included in the curriculum. Content standards are structured so that each level builds on the prior one, and they typically include academic knowledge as well as physical and social skills.

3. Learning or performance standards are outcome oriented. While content standards guide the curriculum, learning standards detail what children should know and be able to do. They are the proof of the pudding. They are necessary because, although the program may put in all the right things, they may not be organized or presented in a way that allows children to learn. Therefore, it is essential to know what outcomes educators and families want so that learning can be assessed. To have learning standards does not mean all children must achieve them at the same time in the same way. It just means we know what we want children to learn.

4. Standards for professional development specify the skills and knowledge teachers should have if they are to be effective. Professional development

standards are generally tied to accreditation and often designate organizational structures for the institution providing training (another kind of program standards) as well as the learning goals and objectives upon which assessment will be based.



© Ellen B. Senisi

Where do standards come from?

The answer to this question may seem obvious. We make them up, *we* being researchers, NAEYC panels, school administrators, curriculum authors and publishers, parents, and even politicians.

In early childhood education the sources of our beliefs about standards are varied. As educators we base our thinking on our own past experiences—as children, parents, or teachers. We form our opinions from research in psychology and/or education, and we also try to project into the future to imagine what

children will need to know and be able to do when they grow up. We usually propose standards with children's best interests at heart, even if we don't always agree about what these standards ought to be.

My version of what standards should be is based on a unique blend of research, personal experience, and my vision of the future. My colleagues may agree or disagree, as will some of you. But a discussion on standards is essential for all of us as early childhood educators, and I present some of my ideas here for your critique.

No standards?

Not all agree on what the standards should be, and many contend there shouldn't be any standards at all. In statehouses and school districts, taxpayers and parents jealously guard their right to decide how children should be cared for and educated and don't want other groups to tell them what to do. In the United States of America we don't easily accept interference with the rights of people to choose what they want.

Many early childhood educators are not big fans of standards. We know how different are individual children and families, and we hesitate to suggest that one size can fit all. It is true that people need different approaches and programs, and teachers need to do different things to respond to them. But, it is not true that programs that say they have no standards actually have no standards. What it means is that standards are implicit, embedded in the particular biases of a teacher, parent, or whatever other adults are making decisions.

When a program has no standards it really means that everyone gets to use their own standards without subjecting them to scrutiny.

When a program has no standards it really means that everyone gets to use their own standards without subjecting them to scrutiny. Expectations are hidden behind such statements as “We teach what is best for each individual” and “We use the teachable moment, so you can’t plan ahead or predict what children will learn.” The result here is that it is difficult to determine what teachers are teaching and what children are learning.

In my view this is an ethical problem. Informed consent demands that teachers and programs advertise and be accountable for the education they offer children and what they expect them to learn. Even when we think teachers reflect the biases of families and/or the community, without a conscious examination, we find surprises in what we thought was said and done. Since young children cannot give informed consent, parents and the community must.

Another criticism of standards is that they are not culturally sensitive. That is, they do not encode the specific behavior and beliefs of different groups. Indeed, in most instances, those who set standards work hard to be inclusive and not to value one group’s childrearing goals and preferences over another’s. But, of course, this is not possible. Just as with teachers whose standards are implicit, standards also have implicit biases. The difference is that standards are explicit, and people can judge their biases. The presence of standards will not free parents from the constant need to monitor their children’s education to ensure they have opportunities to learn. Standards do provide parents with a guide to what they should expect teachers to teach and children to learn.

Yes, standards do have shortcomings. Yet despite the shortcomings, I begin with the assumption that explicit standards are a good idea and that they can form the basis for informed consent for parents, teachers, programs, and the community.



© Ellen B. Semisi

Program standards: Who decides?

Do we need program standards? Some people criticize program standards because different children and families need and want different things, while program standards are a template for what everyone gets. Take teacher credentials, which are often a part of program standards. In Illinois, teachers in state pre-K programs must have a four-year degree and a teaching certificate.

Some parents and community groups would prefer that a teacher speak the child’s home language rather than have a teaching credential. Both criteria—credential and home-language proficiency—have something to recommend them. How should we decide which to encode into a standard?

I can give scores of examples of licensing, Head Start, and state pre-K program standards that evoke annoyance, disgust, and downright outrage. If program standards bother or offend so many, why are they necessary? I think the answer is simple: without program standards children’s health, safety, education, or general well-being might be compromised.

In the United States, people give up some individual liberties for the sake of the common good. But who defines that good? Are all voices equal when considering program standards? Do or should some have entitlement to a greater voice than others? As early childhood professionals, we believe our voice carries such privilege, hence the dissemination of a position on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs (NAEYC 1996) and the recently released NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (NAEYC 2005), for example. These initiatives give NAEYC considerable power to influence, as they become the gold standard for parent selections, state standards, and reimbursement rates for child care services.

NAEYC should not shrink from advocating program standards; but I do think we need to be sure that our program standards are based on the best knowledge available. Standards should acknowledge cultural diversity in practice and approach. For example, I remember Lily Wong Fillmore being outraged that Head Start requirements would call for large paintbrushes, when Chinese children prefer small ones and no research evidence indicates that one brush size is better than others for young children. NAEYC is correct to give a range for group size since we know children do better in small groups, but we don't know exactly how small these groups need to be. When setting program standards, we must not unnecessarily compromise family and community preferences.

Alternative perspectives are important in standards, and I see four areas in which as early childhood educators we need to give special attention:

- supporting meaningful relationships of children with teachers and children with one another
- providing an organizational framework and schedules so that everyone knows what to expect
- delineating content that will lead children toward success in school
- rewarding child participation and involvement in learning

I believe that we should have as few discrete standards as possible and permit programs to explain how they will meet the more general ones.

Content and learning standards

Some early childhood educators say standards are fine for programs but inappropriate for young children. They ask, "Why is it necessary to have standards, especially for prekindergarten and kindergarten?" Even first-, second-, and third-graders do not need specific lists of what should be taught and learned. Many teachers talk about standards being the same as scripts, preventing them from using personal and professional knowledge and limiting what children can be taught and can learn.

Part of the reluctance of teachers to specify what young children should learn, I believe, is the tendency to focus on development at the expense of culture and social learning. The developmental perspective, articulated by Rousseau maturationists and Piagetians, focuses attention on the developmental blueprint, children's inner drive to develop, to make sense of their world and learn from it. This is an inborn capacity to learn certain things, and young children are really quite good at it. Take language, for instance. If children live in a *language community*, they will naturally acquire sounds, babble, say words, make complex sentences. All are developmental achievements and usually accomplished relatively easily. With little direct instruction, children break the meaning code of their home language.

I believe that we should have as few discrete standards as possible and permit programs to explain how they will meet the more general ones.

Some teachers assume that children can learn everything in this way. Just give them lots of toys and opportunities to play, and they will learn all the other important lessons, including reading, writing, and arithmetic. For these teachers, *developmentally appropriate* means the child is learning from his or her own efforts, preferably from self-selected activities, and protected from the influence of adult-imposed activities. They are forgetting that the developmental blueprint is just one side of learning. The other side of learning is determined by children's sociocultural experiences and what they learn from these.

To return to the language analogy, learning language is a developmental accomplishment, but the family and community determine what language children learn, what they speak about, what kind of vocabulary they use, with what kind of assistance from older children and adults, and so on. The culture decides what children should learn and sets up experiences to support children's learning.

Developmental learning and cultural learning are inextricably joined. While developmental capabilities are inborn potential, adults structure and organize the experiences children have so that they learn a particular culture's way of representing them. There is no such thing as developmental competence outside of a cultural context. And, given the diversity around the world, there are obviously many different ways to achieve developmental competence.

Some educators assume that it is natural for all children to learn the same things in the same way, and they take White, middle-class, typically developing children in the United States as a model. This is not true. One student of mine learned this lesson when she decided to set up a literacy-rich environment in an inner-city classroom of African American children. She thought the only developmentally appropriate way to teach so that the children would learn literacy skills was simply to provide the materials and resources, without any direct instruction. Instead of literacy learning, the children threw the crayons, tore the books, and showed little interest in reading or writing.

The children in this classroom had not learned to be interested in or how to make use of these literacy tools and consequently learned little from them. Were the children developmentally able to learn? Absolutely. Could they learn the way the teacher thought was developmentally appropriate? Absolutely not.

Failure to fully appreciate the role of culture in children's development has led some teachers to take an either/or perspective about developmentally appropriate practice. According to this view, learning is either child directed, play based, and appropriate, or it is forced on children by teachers with direct instruction and mindless drill, and therefore inappropriate.



Barbara Bent © NAEYC

Standards recognize the importance of culture, and as social constructions they ideally represent a community compromise on what children should know and be able to do.

Would standards help this problem? Yes. First, standards recognize the importance of culture, and as social constructions they ideally represent a community compromise on what children should know and be able to do. In a multicultural world, we must compromise to arrive at common expectations. Second, standards say clearly that teachers are responsible for organizing the learning environment so that children learn.

Prior experience

What my student, who wanted children to learn in a literacy-rich classroom, missed was knowing that children have to have the necessary foundation—both developmental and cultural—if they are to learn well. It is not enough for teachers to say, “I taught in a particular way and children should have learned” or, conversely, say, “There is no point in teaching that because children cannot learn it.” Teachers are responsible for knowing general developmental guidelines but also for knowing what particular children’s prior experiences have been and organizing new experiences so that they can learn from them.

Too narrow a focus

Some educators criticize learning/performance standards as having too narrow a focus. They contend that children know and can do so much more than we can ever encode into standards. They point out that learning standards tend to focus on school-related skills and knowledge and omit other important learning, like getting along with others, asserting oneself, and using divergent thinking. The solution to this problem is not to get rid of standards but rather to broaden the standards to include a wider range of teaching and learning outcomes.

This solution, however, can present a problem. Too many standards and too many separate things to teach can overwhelm even the most conscientious teacher. I am reminded of another student of mine. She decided to build her early childhood curriculum by planning activities to go with each of the learning standards—until she discovered there are 332 items in her state’s standards. Similarly many teachers complain that quarterly Head Start assessments based on the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework (Head Start Bureau 2003) take so much time that teachers don’t have time to teach the children.

My solution isn’t to forgo standards but to use them more judiciously. One popular instrument for use by kindergarten teachers suggests doing a weekly assessment, since it would be so easy with computer technology. Some standards don’t need to be assessed every week, no matter how good the technology is.

Too frequent assessment of different standards is a problem educators need to address. Some teachers are required to fill in laundry lists of items three times a year, rather than thinking carefully about assessing different learning at different times and in different ways. For example, teachers spend hours writing anecdotal notes on skills that could be readily assessed in a monthly activity and a checklist, saving teacher time for those standards that do not lend themselves to quick and easy assessment. Rather than discarding standards, we need to rethink how we use standards in assessment.

School learning

Another concern is the high academic expectations that standards encompass, which some children cannot meet. From my current work in a public school system, I am very aware of how different teacher beliefs affect children’s

Backing off from high standards because they are hard to reach denies many children the opportunity to learn and is the death knell for their future.

Barbara Bent/© NAEYC



learning. I hear all kinds of reasons, for example, why No Child Left Behind standards are at best unfair and unobtainable and at worst destructive to children. Some teachers believe that children of color growing up in families with low incomes can't learn

the curriculum because of developmental failures. They think that what's wrong is that the children and their families' background, race, or language prevents them from learning and they don't know what to do to help. Whatever the reasons, the end result is the same: some teachers don't teach and many children don't learn.

None of these reasons are a good argument against standards. First, most children in low-income, ethnically and culturally diverse groups are developmentally typical. There is no reason they cannot master the school curriculum, and many schools have demonstrated that children can meet expectations. A preschool teacher recently told me she was concerned that the children would feel bad if they didn't know the things on the assessment sheet.

My answer was "Then teach them!" Meeting school expectations is a challenge for many children, but nowhere near as severe a challenge as school failure.

My experience in a large, urban public school system suggests that teaching ethnically and culturally diverse children is a challenge for many teachers, who have little idea of what to do. The problem, it seems to me, is not setting high expectations, but rather providing the compensation, working conditions, supervision, and education necessary for teachers to do a good job. Backing off from high standards because they are hard to reach denies many children the opportunity to learn and is the death knell for their future.

Assessment

There are two types of assessment in early childhood education: for planning and for accountability. Assessments to help teachers plan are for identifying what children already know, which are their preferred learning styles, and whether they are learning new content that is presented. This type of assessment guides teachers' instruction. Assessments for accountability focus on the product—what the child knows and whether this knowledge is what the program said it taught. Accountability assessments are, of course, the most problematic since they hold teachers, administrators, and educational systems accountable for what children have learned.

Without question, neither form of child assessment is perfect. In using *authentic assessment*, teachers do not always correctly assess children's learning, and with *standardized assessment*, the instruments are crude, young children

often don't cooperate, and educators don't really find out what children know and can do.

Even though we may have trouble assessing accurately, we should be clear about what we want to assess. The problems of our teachers and our instruments call for more work; forgoing standards would only make that work harder. When we ask, "Will standards ensure that all children will learn what we want them to?" the answer is "Probably not; they just give us a better chance of reaching our goals."

Professional development standards

The final type of standard applicable to the early childhood field is professional development standards (Hyson 2003). Many of the previously noted criticisms of standards for children and for programs also relate to professional development standards. As a former administrator in a teacher education program, I know the shortcomings of standards and have protested more than a few of them myself. National, regional, and state standards can offend various constituencies, have too many meaningless dos and don'ts, constrain teacher creativity and student choice, hold programs responsible for outcomes they can't control, aren't sufficiently flexible, and so on.

The standards movement in higher education has evoked tension, controversy, and general hostility, just as it has in school reform. Nevertheless, I must admit that discussing standards, devising strategies to meet them, sharing our ideas about the standards with others, and assessing teacher educators' performance in relation to standards add a level of intellectual rigor that has not always been a part of higher education. Teacher educators, like other educators, are learning to live with standards and learn from them.

Conclusion

For most teachers the hardest thing about the standards movement is having to change. Change is difficult, and it often seems like we would rather fail than try something new. Disinterest in trying new curricula or methods is matched by an equally firm conviction that whatever we did in the past is best—despite the ample evidence that it is not. Standards are not a panacea, nor is change easy or pleasurable. But I think standards can help us as educators to clarify where we want to go and give us a yardstick for measuring our success in getting there.

References

- Head Start Bureau. 2003. The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework. *Head Start Bulletin* (76): 21–32. Online: www.headstartinfo.org/pdf/Outcomes.pdf.
- Hyson, M., ed. 2003. *Preparing early childhood professionals: NAEYC's standards for programs*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- NAEYC. 1996. Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8. Position statement. Online: www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSADAP98.PDF.
- NAEYC. 2005. NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria. Online: www.naeyc.org/accreditation/standards.