

Questioning National Standards in the Field of Early Childhood Education

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To ensure that all children will have a certain equality of education and will achieve academically, many nations have developed national curriculum standards. This article begins with a discussion of the potential benefits and disadvantages of curriculum standards in the field of early childhood education. As curriculum for young children must hold deep personal meaning, be of interest to children, age appropriate, first-hand, and value diversity and inclusion, the usefulness of national standards for early childhood educators is questioned. The article concludes with suggestions for how educators might meld the intent of national standards with the rights of young children in every nation to experience an emergent, meaningful curriculum.

To ensure that all children will have a certain equality of education and will achieve academically, many nations have developed national curriculum standards (Ravitch, 1995). With the laudable goal of providing a conceptual framework of consistent and coherent content that would be taught to all children, some nations, such as Japan, France, and Great Britain, have long instituted a set of national education standards. Others, like the United States of America, Germany, and Canada, rely on states, regions or provinces to determine standards for the curriculum.

Driven by economic competition and the movement toward a "global village," many now believe it is important to be able to compare the achievement of students in one nation with that of students in other countries (Tirozzi & Uro, 1997). Today, more than 30 countries are taking part in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IAEEA). On the grounds that science and mathematics know no culture and are not taught and "should not be taught markedly different from mathematics and science taught in any other modern country" (Ravitch, 1995,

p.40), IAEEA has established standards for these subjects.

National and international standards have both advantages and disadvantages. This article begins with a discussion of the potential benefits and disadvantages of curriculum standards in the field of early childhood education. As curriculum for young children must hold deep personal meaning, be of interest to children, age appropriate, first-hand, and value diversity and inclusion, the usefulness of national standards is questioned. The article concludes with suggestions on how educators might meld the intent of national standards with the rights of young children in every nation to experience an emergent, meaningful curriculum.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Much has been written about the advantages and disadvantages of national standards (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1995; Ravitch, 1995). The concern that national standards are shallow and do not address deep, conceptual learning, or that the specification of standards would result in controlled, sterile curriculum, have been fully expressed (Eisner, 1995; Lewis, 1995). The advantages of standards, which include bringing unity to the curriculum, raising expectations for all children, and improving achievement by clearly defining what is to be learned, have also been described (Batik, 1992; Oakes, 1990; Ravitch, 1995).

The critiques of national standards, however, tend to focus on elementary and secondary curriculum, and generally ignore standard setting for children's achievement during the period of early childhood, from birth through age eight. This is especially true for the period of early childhood prior to entrance into the public elementary school, birth through age five. Regardless, early childhood educators are aware of both the potentials of national standards as well as associated problems.

National curriculum standards could appeal to early children educations for a variety of reasons. First, curriculum standards would serve to unite the field. In the United States as in other nations, the care and education of young children prior to elementary school is not the responsibility of the federal government or the state, but of any number of diverse groups. Employers, churches, businesses, as well as franchised child care programs may have jurisdiction over early education.

With no state or national guidelines delineating what children should know at a given age, curriculum in the field of early childhood programs, child care or preschool, may develop haphazardly. It