

Understanding and Using Early Learning Standards for Young Children Globally

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Around the world, there is an increasing focus on the importance of the early years, with growing numbers of countries specifying early learning and development standards. The authors find that differences in country context and pre-primary service delivery influence the content and use of standards documents. Generally, within their documents, countries favor either specifying precise indicators of what children should know and be able to do, or including many elements that guide early education more broadly, such as broad learning goals for children and pedagogical guidance for teachers. Although the standards' documents vary, countries generally use their documents for the purposes of curriculum development, professional development, parent engagement, and national monitoring and evaluation. By using the standards for multiple purposes, early education is better aligned and countries are advancing the integration of their services. Standards have made numerous positive contributions to the early childhood field, but, lacking rigorous outcome evaluations, it is too early to discern the effect of standards on children's performance and learning. The authors recommend that countries devote greater attention to developing their early childhood infrastructure so that the standards documents are more effectively understood, utilized, and evaluated.

Key words: early learning and development standards, early childhood, pre-primary.

Introduction and Rationale

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In many ways, it is difficult to determine the origin of standards. Indeed, in writing about standards, revered American educational scholar and historian Diane Ravitch (1995) has noted that standards are as old as the Book of Genesis and as new as today's techniques. Like the air that surrounds us, standards are ubiquitous and have been used for centuries as a means for

measuring, valuing, and obtaining consensus around matters of import. Standards arguably came into prominence in American education when business and industry voiced concern about the lack of creativity, invention, and higher order thinking skills in the workforce (Bruer, 1993; Resnick & Resnick, 1983). In addition, the press for standards had deeper and broader roots, inspiring hope beyond the enhancement of workforce capacity. Specifically, fueled by discouraging findings from a notable American report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), standards were deemed capable of addressing the twin and entwined maladies of poor educational quality and inequitable access (Porter, 1994). Standards became the bedrock of invigorated approaches to educational reform and were most prominently manifest in the first set of national education goals ever developed in and for the United States (Jennings, 1995; Porter, 1994).

The trajectory of the standards movement in American early childhood education and development roughly parallels that in primary and secondary education. Though regarded with skepticism by some who claim that standards kill the spontaneity, individualization, and joy typically accorded early education, early learning and development standards have also been regarded as a tool to infuse consistency across a documented history of highly idiosyncratic, uneven,

and often retracted policy and fiscal commitments to early education (Kagan, 2012). They may be regarded as a vehicle for fostering a systematic approach to developing an integrated national early childhood agenda, one that creates continuity for children and coherence for their parents (Kagan & Tarrant, 2010). Moreover, standards may be regarded as a means to specify not only what children should know and do, but may become the base for discerning the content for badly needed professional development in a field that is characterized by a majority of uncertified personnel (Kagan, 2012; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008). Standards can also form the base for curriculum, instructional assessments, parenting education, and monitoring and evaluation.

Simultaneous to the advancement of standards in the United States, in a burgeoning number of countries around the globe, a new focus on young children is taking hold. Widespread and diverse, this focus has engaged a variety of international and national organizations and governments, evoked countless programs and services, and resulted in scores of influential activities and documents (Kagan, 2012). Not inconsequential, these documents guide national commitments to young children, influencing the distribution of resources, the allocation of priorities, and the very nature and content of

programs and services for young children. Among the documents produced are standards that set expectations for what young children should know and be able to do. The focus of this study, this type of standard is often called “early learning and development standards (ELDS),” or—in this document—“standards.”

Despite their growth and increasing popularity, early learning and development standards have been somewhat under-studied and under-analyzed internationally. Very little is known about, for example, how standards documents from around the globe are similar and different, how they are developed and created, and how they are validated and aligned. Perhaps even more importantly, very little is known about how these standards documents are actually being used to guide the development of young children globally. The purpose of this study, then, is to chronicle and analyze the nature and use of early learning and development standards globally; within this context, the study seeks to better understand how different countries “hold” standards, how they define them, how they express these expectations in their standards documents, and the centrality they accord standards and standards documents as elixirs of advancement in pre-primary education. The study is designed to produce information that will be useful to

policymakers, practitioners, and researchers interested in discerning if and how a major social movement (the press toward enhanced accountability) and a major locus of effort in pre-primary education (the early learning standards and standards documents movement) are being carried out, and with what results and impact.

Study Methodology

With the goal of learning about the development and implementation of early learning and development standards internationally, the authors used a three-pronged approach for this qualitative study: country selection, data collection, and data analysis. Anxious to examine countries from both the majority and minority worlds, and countries with diverse political systems, economies, and populations, the authors reviewed the literature about standards in diverse nations, and culled prior standards work done by the large number of countries, including those involved with the UNICEF-sponsored Going Global project. Using this information, the authors developed a list of questions and a list of knowledgeable individuals who could provide current and detailed information about a country’s standards work. Contact was made with these individuals, and in each call, the names of other knowledgeable individuals were sought, using a snowballing technique (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

As a result, the authors were in touch with over 20 individuals, including Early Childhood Specialists in the Regional Offices of UNICEF, members of the Consultative Group, professional colleagues in international NGOs, and individuals at American universities who are doing international early childhood work. From these conversations, the authors developed a list of 12 candidate countries.

For each of the 12 candidate countries, the authors performed an in-depth search of their standards documents via a website review, determining how each country planned to use its standards. Criteria for winnowing down the 12 countries were developed, including five items: the standard document's commitment to diverse populations; longevity of use; number of domains; and alignment with primary/elementary standards documents. Using these criteria, each country was ranked, and the information on each of the 12 candidate countries, along with their criteria rankings, was presented to the study's sponsor. Seven of these 12 countries were selected for inclusion in the study, but in reviewing the seven selected, it became apparent that certain regions of the world were not included. As this violated our aim to have diverse regions of the world represented, the authors revisited the process and ultimately ended up with a final list of 12 countries that encompass the following regions: East Asia (China and Korea), Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore), Central Europe

(Macedonia), Europe (Great Britain and Norway); the Pacific (Australia and the Pacific Island countries of Fiji and Vanuatu); and South America (Chile).

To foster consistent data collection from each of these 12 countries, the authors developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), which included questions regarding the development, present use, perceived effects, and anticipated future use of standards. One-hour interviews were scheduled and conducted over a 4-month period, using Skype. In total, across the 12 countries, the research team interviewed 33 respondents.

Upon completing all interviews, the team wrote case studies for each country, corresponding as needed with interview respondents via email to clarify issues. In addition, feedback on the case studies was received from all countries and was taken seriously on the part of the respondents; the authors appreciated and incorporated the comments. If something remained unclear or seemed contradictory, the authors were in touch via email with the respondents to clarify the content. When case studies for all 12 countries were complete (the authors combined Fiji and Vanuatu into a single case study of the Pacific Islands), they were examined in order to discern common themes around the topics related to the: standards development process; content of the standards; standards implementation processes; use of standards; and current and future effects of standards. Finally, using the key themes, the authors

prepared the cross-country analysis.

Early on in our process, it became apparent that countries used very different terms when discussing early childhood education generally, and when discussing standards more specifically. A key methodological effort, then, was to establish some common working definitions that, for the purposes of clarity and consistency, would be used in this study:

- “Early childhood” and “pre-primary” are used interchangeably to cover the range of education, health, and related services made available to young children in the years prior to their entry into primary school;
- “Standards,” “early learning standards,” “early learning and development standards,” or “learning outcomes” are used interchangeably when referring to individual or groups of items that specify what young children should know and be able to do;
- “Goals” are used to describe broad and general constructs of children’s learning.

Findings Related to Country Context

The development and implementation of standards documents cannot be discussed without first understanding the context from which they arose. Indeed, the choices countries make regarding standards are deeply

connected to unique national values regarding young children and education. To that end, in this section, we elaborate on our findings regarding (i) contextual similarities; (ii) contextual differences; and (iii) differences in pre-primary service delivery, and the influence of such differences on standards.

We focus herein on three important contextual similarities. First, in the countries studied, along with many others globally, there is an increasing focus on the importance of the early years and pre-primary services. Buoyed by neuroscience and econometric data, many countries are acknowledging the importance of, and commitment to, expanding pre-primary services. In the nations covered in this report, there is a clear recognition of the unequivocal link between providing supports to young children, children’s long-term progress, and the economic growth of a country. Second, there is growing recognition that the provision of services alone is not enough to assure these kinds of positive outcomes: the services must be of high quality and distributed to meet the expansion of greater equity and consistency. It is also clear from this analysis that countries pursue different kinds of efforts in order to achieve such enhanced services, with the development of standards being notable among an array of diverse efforts. Finally, beyond revitalized commitments to young children and to the quality, equity, consistency, and transparency of services that support

them, a third commonality inhibits the rapid realizations of these goals; notably, transcendent service fragmentation. In only two of the countries studied were services for young children consolidated within one ministry; in all others, responsibilities for pre-primary education were dispersed across various ministries, levels of government, and the public and private sectors. Such dispersal of responsibility renders the need for common standards all the more necessary and, yet, difficult to achieve.

Contextual differences among countries generally consist of the following. First, there are marked differences in countries' values and attitudes regarding early childhood education, so that, for example, some countries are quite pre-disposed to specifying standards while others favor setting broad learning goals for young children. Second, the degree to which the government actually led, mandated, or supported the standards considerably impacts their development, implementation, and monitoring, with government involvement hastening standards work. Third, in some countries, particularly those with fewer resources, the influence of external non-governmental forces, such as UNICEF or local NGOs, has been powerful in advancing standards work. Fourth, and finally, in countries where similar frameworks or guiding documents had existed, standards development and application processes were hastened.

Finally, it follows that differences in

pre-primary service delivery among countries would also influence the approach to, and content of, the standards. Specifically, we find that the following four factors contribute to the nature and scope of the standards in each of the countries profiled in this report. First, countries define "pre-primary" services differently depending on their values and availability of infrastructure, with some considering it to encompass birth to the age of school entry, while others consider it to encompass the 1 or 2 years immediately preceding school entry. Second, countries vary on the income restrictions they impose for free participation in early childhood education. More specifically, pre-primary services are fee-based and lower-income families often cannot afford to send their children to what is often regarded as a discretionary service. To compensate for this and in acknowledging the potent impact of early education on the development of young at-risk children, governments have targeted increased supports to low-income and at-risk populations, but such efforts vary across countries. Third, geography matters a great deal to the amount and nature of pre-primary services available. For example, in many countries, children from rural areas, irrespective of age, tend to receive fewer services than their urban counterparts. Often in rural areas, health services are a priority and serve as a launching pad for some early education experiences. Fourth and finally, countries vary in the ways in

which they serve children with disabilities, with some countries having quite robust policies for children who are identified with special needs, while in other countries, providing services to special needs populations has proven to be more complex and less prevalent.

Findings Related to Standards Documents

Perhaps our overarching finding related to the content of standards internationally is that standards documents look very different around the globe; stated differently, countries differ in the ways they have organized and presented the content of their documents. To help readers understand the differences among each country's standards, we have developed a typology to describe and define each country's document(s). Specifically, we categorize the documents reviewed in this study into two types: "indicator documents" and "framework documents." Within each type, we further categorize documents according to their structure, predominant characteristics, and content areas, with the indicator documents being divided into two sub-categories: (i) early learning and development standards documents; and (ii) skills progression documents, or "maps." The framework documents are divided into three sub-categories: (i) curriculum frameworks; (ii) inclusive frameworks; and (iii) general learning goals. The typology is depicted in

Appendix.

As illustrated in *Appendix*, documents that fall into the indicator category clearly articulate learning statements with sub-statements, or precise indicators that specify what children should know and be able to do. The first sub-category, early learning and development standards documents, uses the words "standards" and "indicators" to express the learning intentions for young children. The second sub-category, skills progression documents, includes documents that are indicator-based; however, the use of the word "standards" has been rejected, though there is recognition of the importance of specifying child outcomes.

In contrast, framework documents are not primarily devoted to delineating expectations for what children should know and be able to do; rather, the documents in this category include many elements that guide early education and development more broadly, such as pedagogical guidance for teachers, child assessments, and parenting information. Within this overall category, there are three sub-categories. The first sub-category is the curriculum framework, which includes documents that specifically help teachers to facilitate children's learning and development in the classroom; these documents are intended to be used to guide teacher instruction. The second sub-category, inclusive frameworks, consists of either a single document or a series of documents that provide guidance around multiple aspects of

early learning and development in addition to child learning outcomes. Some examples of these include documents provisioning for quality learning environments, health and safety regulations, teacher qualifications, and engaging families. The third sub-category, general learning goals, includes documents that define very broad learning goals for young children; often these goals are intangible and therefore more difficult to measure and monitor.

In addition, regardless of whether they employ indicator or framework documents, countries differ in the age of children covered in their standards. The word “range” is used to denote the beginning and ending ages included in the documents, with some countries’ documents applying to the range of children aged birth to 5 years, with other countries’ documents applying to a narrower range, encompassing children aged 3 to 5 years. The age ranges covered by standards is both varied and seems to be contoured by country context; more specifically, the ages ranges covered are often aligned with the ages for which service provision exists.

Within each age range, countries divide their standards into different “age groupings.” Countries also differ in whether they present their standards in one group for the full age range or present their standards by multiple age groupings (e.g., standards covering the same age range of birth to 5 might be presented in five age groupings [in

distinct sections for: ages birth to 2 years, ages 2 to 3 years, ages 3 to 4 years, and ages 4 to 5 years], or in three age groupings [birth to 18 months, 18 months to 3 years, and ages 4 to 5 years, or any combination thereof]). There is only limited consistency in the manner of presentation across the documents.

Findings Related to the Uses of Standards

Countries with government sanctioned documents generally use their standards documents for the purposes of: (i) curriculum development and instructional assessment; (ii) professional development; (iii) parenting education and engagement; and (iv) national evaluation and monitoring. Each of these four uses is explicated below.

First, countries are committed to synchronizing curriculum and assessments to their standards documents. The process of synchronization is conceptualized and realized differently in different countries. For example, some countries experienced an organic synchronization, as standards, curriculum, and sometimes assessment guidelines, are integrated into a single document. In other countries, either the curriculum preceded the development of the standards, or vice versa; in these cases, curriculum and learning outcomes are closely aligned. In general, the use of standards for instructional assessment is not very widespread, although interesting practices are emerging, mainly advancing the use of observation as an assessment

strategy.

In addition, most countries employ their standards in developing and implementing professional development opportunities. Countries tend to classify their professional development efforts in two categories: pre-service and/or in-service professional development. Countries generally use one or the other, although the use of both is becoming increasingly common in the countries studied. When looking at professional development, some interesting patterns were evident. First, pre-service professional development is common in countries with strong systems of higher education, as well as countries with strong centralized governments that exercise considerable authority over the higher education system. Second, in-service professional development is common in countries with limited financial or human resources, and among those that are developing professional development opportunities rapidly. To support professional development, many countries have developed various tools, such as teacher handbooks, guides, and online materials, based on the standards document. In some countries, the focus on professional development is accompanied by an emphasis on revamping teacher credentialing requirements, raising minimum teaching qualifications, and/or fostering greater consistency in teaching requirements.

Further, countries take diverse approaches to parenting education, including: sharing information about

the standards and/or curriculum; providing parenting education programs; using the media to inform parents and the public; and advancing the inclusion of parents in policymaking. The use of standards for parenting education and engagement, however, is heavily dependent on formal government approval of the standards document itself.

Finally, where they exist, monitoring efforts address three areas: monitoring children, program quality, and/or national policy. Some countries see little social utility to monitoring in general or may not have the resources to do so, and hence monitoring does not take place at all. In other countries, the idea of monitoring is accepted, but there is an aversion to monitoring and reporting children's progress, specifically. In these countries, the monitoring of program quality may be used as a proxy for national child outcome monitoring. On the other hand, some countries do routinely collect data on children's progress, and sometimes this is also accompanied by the collection of data on programs. Increasingly, there is also a tendency among countries to use national child and/or program monitoring efforts to improve national policy. Monitoring of standards, then, is controversial, regarded and executed differently in diverse nations. National evaluations (e.g., controlled studies that seek to examine the use and/or impact of standards documents) are occurring with less frequency than monitoring efforts, though many interviewees

anticipate the development of evaluation efforts as their use of the standards evolves.

Overall Effects of Standards

The ever-expanding development and usage of early learning standards around the world has led to multiple welcome changes to the early childhood field. In particular, standards have helped to professionalize and unify the field; foster efforts to improve quality, equity, consistency, and transparency of early childhood services; and contribute to expanded national policy and public awareness related to the early years. We elaborate on each of these below.

First, especially when incorporated into national law, early learning standards have brought increased professionalization and legitimacy to the early childhood field. Indeed, in some countries, pre-primary services are increasingly regarded as efforts of significant importance, sometimes even being accorded attention equal to primary and secondary education. Typically, an increased interest in professional development accompanies this enhanced attention to early education. Relatedly, standards provide a “common language” to which children, teachers, and programs are held accountable, bringing unity to the field. Indeed, in many countries, the standards document is considered to represent the unification of diverse

disciplines and years of research on young children in those disciplines, therein assuaging the long-extant schism between health, care, and education.

Second, standards and standards documents are routinely seen as part of schemes to enhance the quality, equity, consistency, and transparency of early childhood services. Because standards documents provide clear expectations for what children, and, in some cases, also teachers, should know and be able to do, teachers are equipped with common guidelines for the kinds of learning environments they must provide. In effect, standards foster not only teaching consistency, but also a higher degree of teaching quality, as teachers within a single country hold all children to the same high expectations. In addition, although not all countries we studied are fiscally able to provide services for all children or do not seek to do so, an invigorated commitment to equitable service provision, using common standards or learning outcomes, is being manifest. Finally, standards are being regarded as one important way to build consensus and to redress a lack of alignment between children’s experiences in pre-primary and primary school, as well as to stave off discontinuity among the multiple branches of government responsible for pre-primary education. The advent of standards is bringing heretofore separate ministries together to develop inter-disciplinary consensus regarding what young children should know and

be able to do; ministries that had not worked together are developing joint early learning and development standards and professional development efforts to foster their use. This creates greater consistency and transparency among programs, teacher preparation institutions, and service providers.

Finally, the advent of standards has contributed to expanded national early childhood policy; indeed, in some countries, such accelerated commitments to early education are actually written into national legislation. Even where there is no national legislation regarding pre-primary education, standards have ushered in a new governmental commitment to the field, notably in the area of policy. Relatedly, an increased governmental commitment brings heightened visibility to the field of early education, as well as to the standards documents themselves. Such growing public awareness of the importance of the early years has had multiple effects, including bringing positive changes to parenting practices.

Although the changes to the early childhood landscape discussed above are all significant, perhaps the most important contribution standards can render is manifest in their effects on child outcomes. In some countries, however, even where long-standing commitments to young children exist, a durable database for monitoring child outcomes nationally is either totally lacking, or is quite embryonic, with the aggregated data just emerging. Indeed, many countries pointed to the need to

develop a sustainable approach to measuring child outcomes and monitoring national progress. In some countries, on the other hand, while there is interest in discerning the effects of standards on child outcomes, there is much concern about how best to assess children without compromising the whole-child approach. In sum, despite the numerous positive changes that standards have rendered to the early childhood field, it may be too early to discern the effects of standards on child outcomes.

Recommendations

Given the many different approaches and implementation efforts that are taking hold regarding standards, countries can learn a great deal from each other's work. To that end, the authors recommend that a global mechanism be established so that countries can share information and experiences regarding standards development, validation, and use. This would both showcase countries where standards work is being done and provide support to countries where standards work is in its infancy.

In addition, the authors recommend that countries devote greater attention and resources to developing their early childhood infrastructure, including their early childhood financing, governance, and accountability systems. Indeed, a durable infrastructure is necessary in order to assure that the standards documents are effectively understood

and utilized, particularly in the areas of professional development and national monitoring. Additionally, the authors recommend that countries work on garnering increased government support for the standards, as government support heightens public awareness and visibility of the standards, and facilitates standards implementation. Conversely, as indicated in this study, the lack of government endorsement can impede the effective use of standards. Relatedly, the authors recommend that countries consider embedding the standards into national law and/or diverse pre-primary policies. Indeed, as is evidenced by several countries, standards implementation, as well as pre-primary policy development, is hastened when the standards are embedded in national legislation. Standards documents alone are not and cannot be solely responsible for effecting changes to the early childhood field; government support, legislation and policy are also necessary.

Conclusion

Certainly, standards alone are not *solely* responsible for bringing changes to the field of early childhood. Rather, they are part of a growing international commitment to young children, sometimes capitalizing and sometimes fueling this momentum. Given these accomplishments to date and given the highly varied contexts in which standards documents take hold, the authors offer the

following speculations regarding the future of standards. First, standards will grow in popularity, but their forms may differ. Second, the standards “zeitgeist” is likely to change, but it will be slow—in particular, over time, it is likely that standards will become recognized as a means of evoking more equitable services for all children. Third, standards will increasingly be used for multiple purposes and will become a key element in evolving early childhood systems. Fourth, standards will continue to need support and revision; though the concept of standards is durable, the documents themselves are transitory, needing frequent updating to incorporate new research about young children. Fifth and finally, there will be an increased focus on monitoring and evaluating the impact of standards; only when the field has solid empirical data on the effects of standards will it be able to fully justify standards’ durability as a fundamental element of early education.

Clearly, these speculations suggest a positive future for standards. While it is premature to extoll standards blindly, this analysis suggests that, although laden with challenges, the emerging standards movement is blessed with opportunities for improving the overall conditions of young children globally.

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Appendix

Table Appendix. *Typology of International Early Learning and Development Standards/ Outcome Documents*

	Indicator documents		Framework documents		
	Early learning and development standards documents	Skills-progression documents or “maps”	Curriculum frameworks	Inclusive frameworks	General learning goals
Country					
Australia				X	
Cambodia	X				
Chile		X			
China	X				
Great Britain				X	
Korea			X		
Macedonia	X				
Malaysia	X				
Norway					X
Pacific Islands - Fiji	X				
Pacific Islands - Vanuatu	X				
Singapore (Kindergarten Curriculum Framework)			X		
Singapore (Early Years Development Framework)				X	