It's More Than Content: Expanding the Conception of Early Learning Standards

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of standards-based reform in early childhood education to demonstrate how a particular set of early childhood stakeholders—by laterally incorporating a range of developmental domains within their standards—provided a "rhizoanalytic" response to the Bush administration's call for early learning standards in language, early literacy, and mathematics. By incorporating the work of the National Research Council with Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards, the author considers how early childhood stakeholders can construct future political responses that horizontally and vertically align the field of early childhood education. Such a rhizomatic response provides the opportunity to propose politically viable policies that respect the heterogeneity that exists within the field of early childhood education.

Introduction

As early childhood education (ECE) continues to rise to the top of federal, state, and local policy makers' agendas as a "tool" to improve children's academic performance in the later grades (e.g., Glod, 2006), many researchers and experts within the field are raising cautionary flags to ensure that policy makers understand the uniqueness that exists within the early childhood years (e.g., Stipek, 2006). These stakeholders want to ensure that policy makers do not simply repackage K-12 education reforms for the early years. Simply altering K-12 policy solutions fails to recognize the complexity that is inherent in ECE.

This article investigates this repackaging of the K-12 standards-based accountability reform within ECE through a case study of the formulation and implementation of Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards (Early Learning Standards Steering Committee, 2003). Specifically, it examines how a collection of early childhood stakeholders within the state aligned the norms and practices of ECE with policy makers' demands for naming content, performance, and proficiency standards that align with Wisconsin's K-12 standards. I employ Glenda MacNaughton's (2004) model of rhizome analysis to illuminate the complexity that exists within their response and to consider how the field of ECE can promote a vision of reform that moves beyond the linear logic that frames current education policy.

A rhizome is a horizontal underground stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes to grow and reproduce in a lateral manner, and, as such, a rhizomatic approach to early learning standards frames the child's growth as simultaneously occurring across a range of domains in an uneven and varied process that is never finished. Such a lateral vision of learning runs counter to the current notion of standards-based accountability reform that frames the growth and education of the child as the attainment of a specific set of academic knowledge and skills.

I then intertwine this form of lateral logic with the work of the National Research Council's *How People Learn* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000)—which incorporates a language of reform that policy makers recognize—and with the work of other early childhood researchers (Stipek, 2006; Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Through this approach, I consider how the field might propel a horizontal and vertical conception of learning (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004) that expands from the preschool years into the early childhood grades (K-3) within the elementary school system (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Early Childhood Education Policy Redux

Historically, establishing a political response to the call for improved student learning and performance with young children is not new to the field of ECE. For instance, the National

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) responded to an increased emphasis on accountability and formal academic instruction in a child's early years that emerged during the 1980s by publishing a series of organizational responses for what it believed to be developmentally appropriate practices for young children (e.g., Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1995; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).[1] While these publications were not a set of policy documents per se, many early childhood practitioners used this work as a political response to define and defend their practices with young children through empirically based research.

The Bush administration's Good Start, Grow Smart (GSGS) initiative renews this same push by policy makers for increased student performance in the early years of a child's life. The GSGS initiative emerged shortly after the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—currently referred to as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002). Like NCLB, GSGS emphasizes improved student performance and increased accountability in early childhood environments, such as Head Start, that serve children ages 3-5. This initiative includes the call for state agencies that serve young children and receive federal dollars to develop early learning standards.

GSGS has made early learning standards a national issue, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families requirement that state agency applicants detail the development of their early learning standards in their state's 2004 request for Child Care and Development Funds furthers the objectives of the GSGS project. (Several states had approved—e.g., Texas, Connecticut, Florida—or began to pursue early learning standards prior to this initiative; see Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003.)

While the regulatory power of early learning standards varies among the states, their presence has caused researchers (e.g., Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003) and early childhood organizations (e.g., NAEYC & the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE), 2002, 2003; National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)—see Bodrova, Leong, & Shore, 2004) to provide guidelines and research-based suggestions for formulating and implementing such a policy tool. Additionally, these researchers and organizations have used the emergence of these early learning standards as a vehicle to raise important questions about how such policies could affect the field of ECE. For instance, Kagan and Scott-Little (2004) highlight the fact that this call for standards does little to improve teaching or address the inequity that exists among early childhood programs.

A key issue with standards-based accountability reform is that the theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974, Weiss, 1995) for its underlying policies aligns poorly with most conceptions of ECE (e.g., Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This theory of action requires the development of content standards, which name the specific knowledge and skills that students are to acquire at particular times in their academic career. Linked with these content standards is an accountability system that sets a degree of proficiency (proficiency standards) that students are to attain in relation to these content standards on specific assessment measures (performance standards). Embedded within this accountability system is the threat of sanctions for schools, teachers, or students that are intended to motivate each to work harder (O'Day, 2002; Elmore, 2001). As students progress through school, they are to retain an explicit set of content and skills that they can implement on a particular assessment measure at a specific level of performance (see Figure 1).
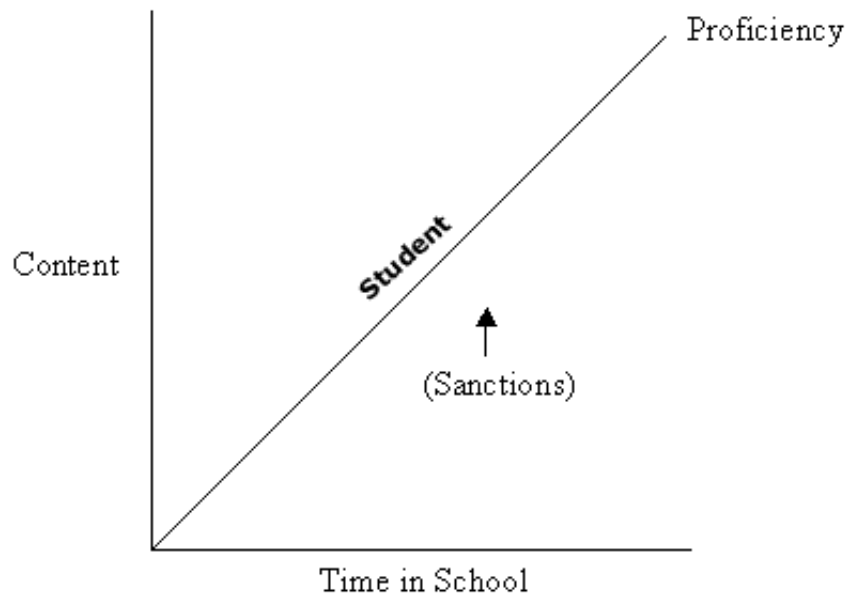
*Figure 1. The expected trajectory of learning
embedded in standards-based accountability reform.*

This linear and generalized view of the education process contradicts much of what is known about ECE. For instance, empirical research demonstrates that children develop at varying rates; their experiences significantly influence their learning; and to become successful and persistent learners, children must be provided with the opportunity to develop their emotional, regulatory, and social development skills along with their cognitive skills (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995; Shepard, Taylor, & Kagan, 1996; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

In response to this increased interest in enacting standards-based accountability reforms in ECE, early childhood researchers such as Neuman and Roskos (2005) and professional organizations such the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2002) and NIEER (see Bodrova et al., 2004) have begun to provide guidance in formulating early learning standards that allow for multiple practices and viewpoints of growth and development within ECE. As Neuman and Roskos (2005) point out, "To build coherent, unified state systems, then, standards-based education must be approached from what is known about young children's learning and development—an early childhood perspective —rather than on merely aligning standards with K-12 systems" (p. 126).

Building off of Neuman and Roskos' (2005) statement, which is echoed by others (Kendall, 2003; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004), I incorporate MacNaughton's rhizoanalytic lens to move beyond a cause-and-effect viewpoint of standards-based accountability reform to consider a policy response that addresses the issue of student performance while respecting the complexity of ECE and of the child.

MacNaughton's Conceptual Understanding of the Rhizome

Through the construct of the rhizome, MacNaughton (2004) advocates for the replacement of the traditional linear view of child development with a conceptual understanding of a child's growth and learning that "explains things in terms of a dynamic, ever-changing 'becoming', rather than a fixed and finished 'being'" (p. 93). MacNaughton employs this construct of the rhizome to reply to the recent findings in neuroscience ("brain" research) that frame the development of young children's brains as a linear process that views learning as a series of interlocking and progressive steps. MacNaughton (2004), using the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), contends that this research incorporates a "tree-like" logic—the tree being a "metaphor of the fixed, determining and linear logic that explains things in terms of cause-and-effect relationships" (p. 89). A rhizomatic framing of development "embraces complexity and chaos

and attempts to find ways to map it" (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 99). It is a "lateral" logic that recognizes the "complex and shifting ways in our 'becoming'" (p. 94) and "replaces certain 'hard facts' with shifting and multiple truths" (p. 92).

MacNaughton (2004) makes the case that the logic of linear causality embedded in fields of study such as brain research fail to address the changeability, diversity, and complexity that exist within the growth and development of young children. For instance, how can this viewpoint of development explain the "late bloomer" or justify investing in lifelong learning if the early years matter the most (p. 96).

MacNaughton's conceptual understanding of the rhizome challenges the traditional conception of standards-based accountability reform that creates an educative process in which the "end product"—in this case the educated child—is clearly defined by the attainment of specific proficiency standards. Instead, a rhizomatic approach to reform would create a lateral structure of development that allows for complexity and heterogeneity in the growth and learning of the child and the practices of ECE. This is not to say that a rhizoanalytic perspective totally abandons the developmental perspective (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Katz, 1996) or a perspective that emphasizes the influence of culture on development (e.g., Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Fleer, 2005). Rather, these viewpoints become part of the "offshoots" of the lateral rhizoanalytic process that views growth and development of the child as always being in the process of becoming (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 93).

It is this idea of the rhizome that I use to analyze the formulation of Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards. I contend that the policy response of the members of the Early Learning Standards Steering Committee (ELSCC) and their advisees provides an example of what a document that allows for complexity, diversity, and changeability within ECE might look like. I then link this committee's actions with the work of the National Research Council and other early childhood researchers to foster a discussion as to how the field of ECE can create policy responses that address Kagan and Scott-Little's (2004) call for horizontal and vertical alignment within ECE. My intention in developing this "rhizomatic" response is to propose a conceptual understanding of reform that is not only politically viable but that also respects the heterogeneity that exists within the field of ECE (e.g., Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Lubeck, 1998; Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Methodology

This instrumental case study examines the formulation and implementation of Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards (MELS). This case study provides an opportunity to understand how the early childhood community can respond to policy makers' call for greater standardization within the field of ECE (Stake, 1995; 2000).

Data Generation

Data generation for this instrumental case study occurred through interviews and the analysis of artifacts (Stake, 1995, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I interviewed key stakeholders who were active in the formulation and implementation of the MELS. Participants included in this study are a representative from each of the five organizations that made up the ELSSC, the project consultant, and six of the project advisees. The steering committee members represent various state agencies that provide funding for or assistance to students who attend ECE programs in the state. The project advisees interviewed for this study represent a collection of university faculty, members of parents' associations, school district employees, and early childhood teachers. (Over 100 early childhood stakeholders reviewed various drafts of the MELS.) Additionally, I selected public documents that referred to the GSGS initiative and the MELS themselves, including drafts of the MELS that led up to the first printing and documents that discuss the MELS formulation

process (e.g., Haglund, 2005).

Context

In this case study of Wisconsin, early learning standards did not exist prior to the steering committee and its advisees' release of the MELS in October 2003 to comply with the requirements for requesting Child Care and Development Funds and to provide a policy response that satisfied the GSGS initiative. Failure to respond to these requests could have led to political sanctions for these agencies, either in the form of reduced funding or political shame. The standards are currently voluntary for Wisconsin's early childhood programs, and the committee decided upon a "train-the-trainer" model for implementation and professional development. Yet, the voluntary nature of the MELS makes it difficult to reach members of the early childhood community that do not receive state or federal funding.[2]

Analysis

My analysis of the data followed traditional qualitative inquiry (Erickson, 1986; Wolcott, 1994; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Strauss, 1996; Graue & Walsh, 1998). I read and reread interview transcripts to identify relevant themes in the data, which I then coded using both external and internal codes (Graue & Walsh, 1998). The themes that I developed derive themselves from the relevant data, and I read them against the text in search of contradictory evidence (Wolcott, 1994; Strauss, 1996; Graue & Walsh, 1998). I then created a research text that outlined the data according to these themes, which included references to quotes and notes that supported and challenged my initial understanding of this case (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Finally, I transformed the research text into this interpretive document that represents my understanding of the formulation of Wisconsin's ELSSC and its advisees (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Addressing the Call for Early Learning Standards

ELSSC members and their advisees formulated a response to the call for early learning standards by creating a document that recognizes the density of experiences and knowledge that exists within children's lives (see Table 1, Density of Experiences). In creating this response that expands learning across all developmental domains, the ELSSC members and their advisees addressed the issue of establishing a common language for the field (See Table 1, Creating a Common Language).

Unlike K-12 education in the United States, ECE in the United States comprises a collection of varying program models that have a range of intentions and goals for young children. It is not a linear field of practice, and simply creating a sequential set of content that emphasizes a particular body of knowledge and skills in specific subject areas violates many of the principles of individual programs within ECE. As ELSSC Member #3 stated, "We aren't looking for a standardized preschool experience."

Table 1
Stakeholders' Goals for the MELS

Theme	Stakeholders' Statements
Density of Experiences	We [wanted to] let them know what we want for our children. It includes relationships. It includes playing. It includes learning how to be angry in appropriate ways. It's not just academics. It's not just skills. It's the social. It's the physical. It's everything. (Advisee #3)
Creating a Common Language	We were creating a piece that pulls together what we know about what children need to learn from birth to age 5, so that we [the field of ECE] can have some common ground to stand on as we create a variety of programs and delivery models for parents and kids and schools. (Advisee #2)

Rethink the Difference	We hope that [the MELS] will make, from the school and the kindergarten perspective, those people start rethinking the differences between kindergarten early learning standards and their [K-12] academic standards. We hope that they will rethink their philosophy behind young children and remind people that young kids learn differently (ELSSC Member #2)
Conversation Starter	The idea is to get some standards out there for people to be thinking about what are the important domains in terms of child development. Then figuring out the resources where we can assist with that or finding other agencies and supports to be able to translate the standards into practice—having higher-quality settings for children in education and in care. (ELSSC Member #3)

The ELSSC members did want the MELS to persuade the K-12 education stakeholders that their construction of standards-based reform misses the mark when educating young children (see Table 1, Rethink the Difference). They hoped that the document would foster a conversation about what is important in educating young children (see Table 1, Conversation Starter) while ensuring that they were not merely creating a document that could be turned into a checklist. This goal made these stakeholders think "a whole lot more about what [they] don't want than what [they] do want" (ELSSC Member #2). Consequently, the primary goal for the committee and its advisees was to create a politically viable response that fostered an early learning community that respected and promoted diversity and complexity rather than standardizing all practices.

Yet, embedded in these stakeholders' comments is the residue of "tree logic"—ensuring that a child progresses along the continuum, which links directly with standards-based accountability reform and the trajectory illustrated in Figure 1. Within the rhizoanalysis process, this idea of progress can be seen as an offshoot on the lateral structure of a rhizoanalytic approach. The ELSSC members recognized that presenting a view of the education process that is similar to Figure 1 could be harmful to the child. For instance, ELSSC Member #1 stated, "Whatever is developed could be interpreted indirectly and could be harmful to the child." Thus, they wanted to ensure that progress was viewed as being more complex than a particular point on an assessment measure.

With these concerns in mind, I now turn to the MELS to provide insight into what was actually produced by the ELSSC and how this document attempts to reconfigure the educative process of Figure 1 for early childhood programs in Wisconsin.

The Content—Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards

This desire by ELSSC members to generate a document that would provide a common ground and that would respect the diversity that is inherent in early childhood programs is reflected in the document itself.

The committee established eight guiding principles "to inform the development and application of Early Learning Standards in Wisconsin" (p. 10). These principles make statements such as *all children are capable and competent; a child's early learning and development is multidimensional; children are members of cultural groups that share developmental patterns; children exhibit a range of skills and competencies within any domain of development; and parents are children's primary and most important caregivers and educators.*

While the MELS do align with the state's K-12 Model Academic Standards, they do so through a lens that "specif[ies] developmental expectations for children upon kindergarten completion supported by practice-based evidence and scientific research" (ELSCC, 2003, p. 7). (The MELS can be found at http://dpi.wi.gov/fscp/pdf/ecelstan.pdf.)

Rather than delineate content, performance, and proficiency standards among content areas, the ELSSC had the MELS cover five developmental domains: health and well-being, social and emotional development, language development and communication, approaches to learning, and cognition and general knowledge. Moreover, at the bottom of each page of the developmental

domain is the following statement:

> The Early Learning Standards recognize that children are individuals who develop at individual rates. While they develop in generally similar stages and sequences, greatly diverse patterns of behavior and learning emerge as a result of the interaction of several factors, including genetic predisposition and physical characteristics, socio-economic status, and the values, beliefs, and cultural and political practices of their families and communities.

From this perspective, the development of the child takes on many of the principles of MacNaughton's rhizoanalytic view of growth and progress in the child. These statements present a child that is "dynamic, ever-changing 'becoming' rather than a fixed and finished 'being'" (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 93).

Within the MELS document, each of the five developmental domains contains a rationale for such categorization and is subdivided into discrete categories. For instance, within the developmental domain of social and emotional development are the categories of emotional development, self-concept, and social competence. In each category, developmental expectations state what the child should know and be able to do "within the expected wide variability of development that occurs in the early childhood period" (ELSSC, 2003, p. 7). For example, under emotional development, the developmental expectation is that "children in Wisconsin will be emotionally healthy" (ELSSC, 2003, p. 12). For each developmental expectation, a set of performance standards describes how one might know whether the child is meeting the developmental expectation. In this case, the child is to be able to use words to express emotions. Finally, a program standard describes what a program should do to provide the child with opportunities and experiences to meet the developmental expectation (ELSSC, 2003, p. 7). Again, for this developmental expectation, "early care and education programs will provide the environment, context, and opportunities for children to develop emotional competence" (ELSSC, 2003, p. 12). Thus, these developmental domains provide guidance through developmental expectations that identify the types of performance that students are to demonstrate and the experiences that early childhood programs in Wisconsin are to offer their children.

In the content areas of language, early literacy, mathematical and logical thinking, scientific thinking and problem solving, and social systems understanding, the developmental expectations ask students to demonstrate particular tendencies rather than specific skills. For instance, the performance standards for early literacy state that the student shows evidence of an understanding of such things as concepts of print, alphabetic awareness, phonological awareness, etc. Such wording demonstrates how the ELSSC intentionally created a document that is resistant to becoming a gatekeeping device.

This strategic response represents a more lateral than linear view of knowledge and young children (see Figure 2). The committee expanded the requirements of the GSGS initiative and shifted the MELS emphasis from language, early literacy, and mathematics to five developmental domains that are embedded in a set of eight guiding principles. However, this complex and "becoming" view of child development is difficult to map on top of the linear view of standards-based accountability reform. The comments of Advisee #5 capture this difficulty in presenting a policy response that honors "changeability, assume[s] diversity and engage[s] with complexity" while promoting some form of content for children to acquire through the educative process (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 100):

> There were people who did not want to focus on content. They wanted to focus on contexts, and I am conflicted about that. Just loving them enough is not enough. There is something pretty powerful in being able to state the content of activity and that's where the power of standards comes from. It forces people to be explicit about what they're doing. (Advisee #5)

This advisee's desire for practitioners to explicate what they are doing gets at the heart of the matter of standards-based accountability reform. Standards name what students are to know and do, and this "content," along with its proficiency expectations, guides the types of practice and learning that everyone who is part of the ECE process should be providing to the child. Thus, to construct a sustainable political response during this era of standards-based accountability reform, early learning standards must address the issues of content, assessment, and levels of performance.

Kagan and Scott-Little (2004), in their analysis of state agencies' development of early learning standards, suggest that early learning standards should not be a stand-alone document but rather "serve as a basis for pedagogical, curricular, and assessment reform within any age group" (p. 394). For Kagan and Scott-Little, establishing horizontal alignment through the standards, assessment, and curriculum triad offers the field the opportunity to clarify the practices of early childhood educators with particular age levels of children across programs. Their vision of standards-based reform is more than simply naming content. It is the process of establishing an early education system that provides consistent content, assessment, and curriculum for children at particular age levels. This horizontal alignment promotes a vertically aligned education system that outlines a specific trajectory of student growth in knowledge and performance (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Kauerz, 2006).

Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards

Language, Literacy, Mathematics

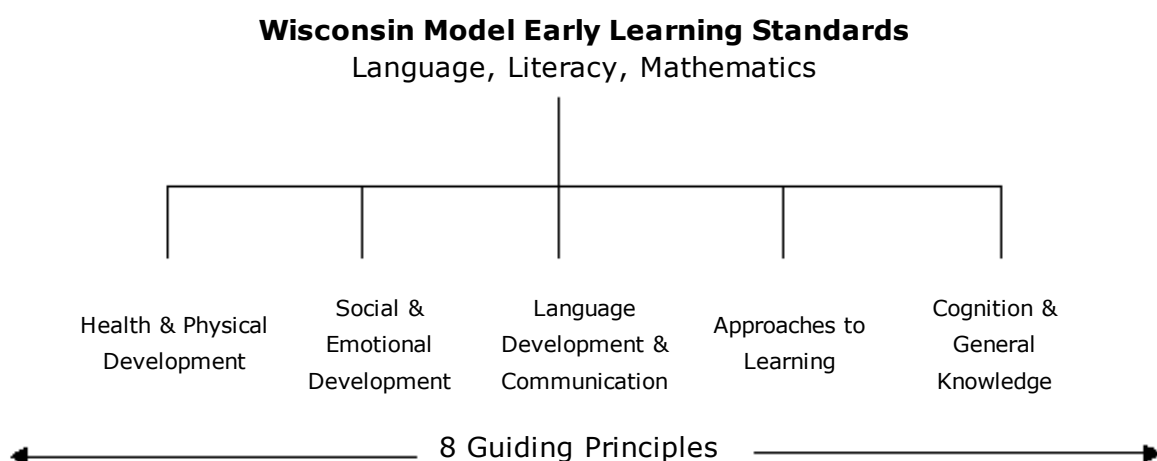| Health & Physical Development | Social & Emotional Development | Language Development & Communication | Approaches to Learning | Cognition & General Knowledge |

8 Guiding Principles

Figure 2. Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards.

ELSSC members recognized the importance of horizontally aligning ECE in Wisconsin. However, such alignment raises a number of issues. ELSSC Member #1's comments highlight some of this friction in addressing Kagan and Scott-Little's (2004) standards/assessment/curriculum triad:

This [the MELS] is a document that can provide the foundation for experiences that children need to help them succeed in school. Curriculum is different, assessment tools are different, and we need to provide the link from the curriculum to the standards, and from an assessment to the standards. But without identifying a specific curriculum, because Wisconsin has not done that without identifying a specific observation tool, we are often asked, "How does it compare to early childhood curriculum such as the Creative Curriculum (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002) or to High Scope (e.g. Kruse, 2005)?"[3] So we need to find some ways to make linkages. Child care programs, especially small group centers and family child care programs are asking for resources. "How do I address the domain for language development and communication? What are some examples?" While we have another group of folks saying, "Don't do that because you're going to create a pathway for someone to begin assessing children on it and create a way to make a checklist for it." So we need to find a way to provide materials that will bring a comfort level and provide experiences for children.

This committee member's statement demonstrates that the MELS are but one piece of the standards-based reform process in ECE. While adding additional pieces of Kagan and Scott-Little's (2004) triad such as curriculum helps provide early educators with direction and purpose, specifying a curriculum also raises numerous issues surrounding assessment and performance. Advisee #5's comments highlight the committee's attempt to strike a balance within these interlocking pieces of horizontal alignment:

> I was hoping that the standards would be specific enough that it would be meaningful so that they would promote some kind of action, but not so specific that they would hamstring people who shouldn't be hamstrung.

By emphasizing this idea of "action," this advisee's comment touches upon each aspect of Kagan and Scott-Little's (2004) triad. The triad is to guide practice by causing the practitioner to reflect upon the standards and the child's knowledge and skills, and providing a curiculum that guides the child toward the performance expectations that are aligned with the content standard.

While the logic of this triad has limits, the difficulty in providing an alternative response to this "tree logic" is that the intended political response must provide some sort of horizontal and vertical guidance to early childhood educators and their programs. Laterally viewing growth and development (e.g., Figure 2) is not enough.

I now turn to the National Research Council's (Bransford et al., 2000) conception of a learning environment and the curricular and program considerations raised by researchers such as Neuman and Roskos (2005) and Stipek (2006) to consider how the field can promote a policy response that respects the diversity and ambiguity that exists within children's growth and learning while providing elastic horizontal and vertical boundaries to the field.

A Horizontally and Vertically Aligned Political Response

In describing how the rhizoanalytic analysis process might work, MacNaughton (2004) emphasizes that it would highlight "how relationships and meanings link in complex and shifting ways in our 'becoming'" (p. 94). McNaughton uses the rhizoanalysis of children's identities as an example of what she means. She states:

> rhizoanalysis of young children's identities as learners would show how those identities overlap with cognition that, in turn, overlaps with cultural experiences that, in turn, overlaps with parents' expectations that, in turn, overlaps with their age that, in turn, overlaps with their experiences of early childhood settings that, in turn, overlaps with geographical location that, in turn, overlaps with national identities that, in turn, overlaps with history that, in turn, shifts over time (Mansfield 2000). (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 94)

Mapping this conception of rhizoanalytic research onto a policy response that addresses the issue of horizontal and vertical alignment of ECE illuminates the fact that working with young children involves more than defining the standards/assessments/curriculum of practice. It entails incorporating the child, her community, her family, and the education system itself. MacNaughton's (2004) broad conception of learning aligns with the work of the National Research Council and its attempt to define the process of creating an environment for learning with understanding. In essence, these types of learning are the goal of the standards-based accountability movement. Yet, achieving this type of learning is more complex than simply teaching a set of content standards in an environment that uses sanctions to improve performance.

The National Research Council, in *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford et al., 2000), states that schools, educators, and families must strive to create learner-centered environments. Such environments are student centered, knowledge

centered, assessment centered, and community centered. A student-centered environment incorporates the child's personal experiences and cultural understanding of the world so that the teacher can provide a learning environment that links the child's conception of the world around her to the learning task (e.g., Goldstein, 1999). To assist the child in developing competence in the subject matter, the teacher must provide learning opportunities that focus on acquiring deep factual knowledge in a developmentally appropriate manner (e.g., Stipek, 2002). Such experiences provide in-depth learning experiences that study topics within the context of a conceptual framework and teach the children how to organize this new information in a way that facilitates retrieval and application—assisting the student in monitoring her own learning (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 16). For instance, Neuman and Roskos (2005) point out that for children to develop high-level literacy skills, including phonological awareness, such learning must take place "interactively" and "in coordination and interaction with meaningful experiences" (p. 127).[4] Furthermore, the teacher must assess her students to know how effective her instruction is and what areas her students need assistance within their learning. Conducting formative assessments using a range of appropriate tools (i.e., anecdotal records) that provide immediate feedback to the student is essential (e.g., Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005; Cress, 2004). Finally, these experiences need to take place in a community that has a shared vision for learning and has high expectations for all students. The community extends beyond the immediate ECE learning environment and into the school, the child's home, and the larger community.

While these principles do emphasize a linear view of content, they define the process of learning as complex and integrated. In fact, these ideas can be incorporated into Figure 2 to create a lateral view of learning that not only emphasizes the student, knowledge, assessment, and community, but also layers the early learning standards, such as the MELS, within each construct (see Figure 3). Rather than view learning for understanding as a process in which the child's knowledge and skills are simply to increase the longer that child stays in school, learning for understanding is a complex interaction among a range of constructs that interact with each of the child's developmental domains in and out of the school environment. This lateral vision of growth and development opens ECE to numerous perspectives of learning while at the same time demanding that the practitioner tap into the expectations and experiences of the child and her community. This conception of learning moves away from the "simple roadmap to certain destinations" and offers the possibility "to do things differently" (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 100).

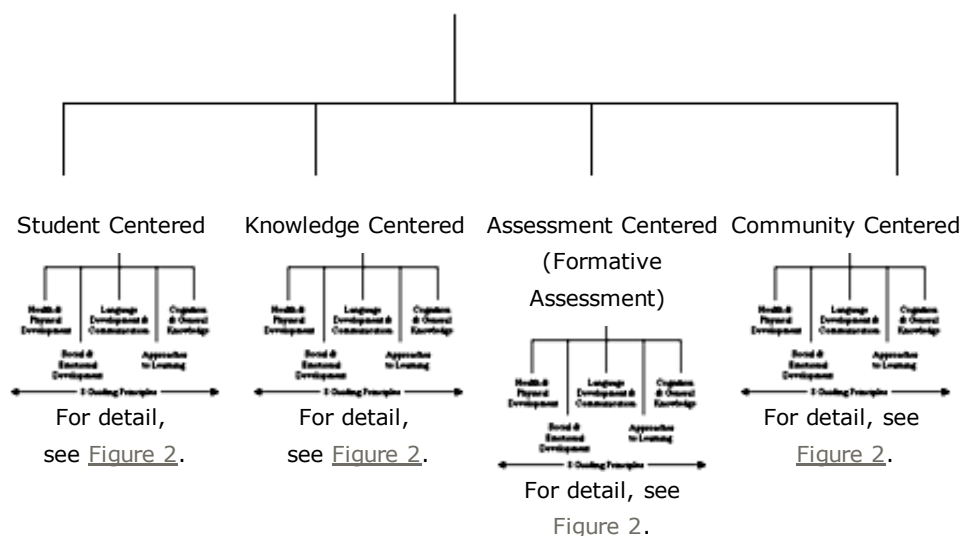**An Environment that Fosters Learning for Understanding**

Figure 3. An enviornment that fosters learning for understanding.

Returning to Kagan and Scott-Little's (2004) triad that strives for horizontal and vertical

alignment, the lateral conception of learning outlined in Figure 3 views content, assessment, and curriculum as part of the process of learning. The notion of alignment both horizontally and vertically expands beyond these three constructs, which now become part of one of the many roots of this policy response, and Figure 3 creates a space for the child, her family, the community, the country, that point in history, and so on. This policy response not only answers the policy makers' call for standards-based accountability reform but also expands the dialogue beyond simply naming content, performance, and proficiency standards. This lateral vision allows for the interaction between various empirically based theories of learning and development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003).

Discussion

This case study of the formulation and implementation of Wisconsin's MELS exemplifies what a lateral vision of early learning standards can look like. The ELSSC's document is rhizomatic and moves beyond the traditional fossilized notion of development that permeates the current policy responses for early childhood reform (Fleer, 2005). The ELSSC reframed (Lakoff, 2002) the logical construction of standards as a means to an end (e.g., Figure 1); as a result, the MELS represent a collection of possibilities rather than a single set of content or performance expectations.

This ELSCC's vision of the field aligns with the work of authors such as Kagan and Scott-Little (2004) and organizations such as NAEYC and NIEER—all of whom recognize not only the opportunity that early learning standards offer the field of ECE but also the problems that could develop if policy makers do not move beyond the dominant linear view of ECE.

While MacNaughton's conceptual understanding of the rhizome within a policy response can seem overly or even unnecessarily complex, her lateral line of thinking prevents one from reengaging with the linear model of standards-based reform. Furthermore, it prevents early childhood educators from looking for particular indicators in a child's growth and development to define whether or not the child is "normal" or performing at the "proficient" level on a particular assessment. As a result, the 5 year-old child is no longer seen as a collection of standards but rather as a collection of possibilities.

Such an approach moves away from the current policy push for standards-based reform that promotes a singular view of learning and knowledge that results in an "end product," which typically requires students to achieve a specific level of performance on a standardized measure. A rhizomatic view of learning, which the MELS represent, repositions such an understanding so that a test score becomes one of many markers or representations of growth and development within a child's life.

This organic vision of policy allows numerous roots to grow as well as to die within the policy response itself and within the child without destroying the entire system of ECE or damaging the child's progression through school. The rhizomatic approach allows for and respects the standard-setting process at the local level, which provides the opportunity for early childhood stakeholders to link their work to the needs of their local community.

So, as policy makers across the United States continue to ask early childhood stakeholders —"What are your early learning standards?"—the MELS provide a textual example of early learning that moves beyond simply naming content, performance, and proficiency standards. The MELS replace the typical standards-based construction of learning as the acquisition of subject area knowledge with a set of developmental domains, which represent a more expansive and yet traditional vision of ECE (e.g., Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The MELS are not only an initial response for the ELSSC, but they are also one of many possible responses that the early childhood community can employ. Therefore, in considering how one might refine the MELS as well as formulate a policy document that can satisfy policy makers' future demands on early learning programs, I've taken up Kagan and Scott-Little's (2004) call for

creating a horizontal and vertically aligned document by linking the work of the ELSCC with the National Research Council's outline for learning. Such a response respects the complexity that the MELS foster by encouraging the creation of learning environments that address student learning across all five developmental domains, expands the traditional construction of assessment within policy reform, and links such a document to the community within which these practices are taking place. Moreover, by stating that the MELS extend to the end of kindergarten, the ELSSC and its advisees pushed their vision of early childhood reform into K-12 education, providing a textual example of how the field of ECE might use the formulation and implementation of early learning standards as a vehicle for transmitting an early childhood perspective back into kindergarten and first through third grades.

Thus, this rhizomatic response provides the foundation for a political response that addresses policy makers' concerns for improving the learning experiences of young children, shifting the goals of ECE from a viewpoint in which the emphasis of reform is on producing a child who must demonstrate particular skills to a learning process in which educators are to provide multiple opportunities for the child to learn a range of skills and knowledge.

Yet, these actions by the ELSCC represent only one of the many reforms that would need to take place if ECE is to mirror the K-12 reform process (e.g., see Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). While the existing empirical research on the implementation of standards-based reforms in K-12 systems of education confounds one's ability to predict whether such policy changes could improve the growth and development of young children in an appropriate manner (e.g., Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Firestone, Schorr, & Monfils, 2004; Powers, 2004), this alternative view of early learning standards offers an opportunity to consider how early childhood stakeholders might reposition ECE within this rhetoric of education reform. Shifting one's focus from achieving a particular trajectory of reform to creating a learning process that respects the complexity of the field, the child, her family, and the community allows for issues of equity and justice to surface rather than focus debates over specific pedagogy or curriculum (Silin & Lippman, 2003). Moving beyond the construct of the standardized child opens the process of change in ECE to the needs of local communities and families. As a result, being ready and willing to learn is no longer a set of skills and knowledge that children must acquire but, rather, something that they already possess.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I recognize that many within the field of ECE questioned whether NAEYC's document promoted a mono-cultural, middle-class, Piagetian view of development that favored particular learning and community practices over others (e.g., see Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Cannella, 1997) and that NAEYC's revised guidelines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) still have not satisfied these voices of concern (e.g., Lubeck, 1998; Fendler, 2001).

2. In 2005, more than 190 participants, which included parents and representatives from the child care community, public schools, and Head Start, completed the full-length Wisconsin MELS training; over 130 participants completed a single-day training; and 500 individuals have participated in an overview session of the Wisconsin MELS training (see http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/docs/2005TR.pdf). 3. The High/Scope Curriculum, the Portage Model, and the Creative Curriculum all provide documents that align their curricula with the state's MELS (see http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/earlyls.htm for links to these documents).

4. See Neuman and Roskos (2005) for a review of research of key predictors of early literacy and mathematics achievement and a process by which to link these predictors to early learning standards.

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