

Taking a Stand on Standards of Experience

by Lilian G. Katz

The adoption of state and national education standards has been steadily increasing in recent years. Sometimes they are referred to as 'standards of achievement,' sometimes as 'standards of performance,' and often as education outcomes.¹ Most recently, national "Common Core Standards" have been introduced to encourage all educators to improve their efforts to meet standards and to produce outcomes of educational programs around the country.

This increasing reference to performance standards and outcomes has become part of the new cliches in the field. Cliches are usually defined as broad, stereotyped, and over-used expressions that are sufficiently vague that large numbers of people can readily agree with them. They also have a kind of 'common sense' quality to them. But, the increasing efforts to adopt standards for the wide variety of early childhood provisions we have raises some troubling questions about their appropriateness, and perhaps also their potentially damaging effects.

By way of example, the state of Illinois issued a manual entitled "Illinois Early Learning Standards for Children 3-5"¹ in 2004 that refers to 'benchmarks' for all children within that age group. Seven guiding principles are listed, such as: "Early learning and development are multidimensional," "Young children

are capable and competent." "Children are individuals who develop at different rates," and so forth.

In addition to the list of quite reasonable assumptions, eight 'learning areas' are suggested. They include language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and so on. However, when specific subject- or content-related standards are presented, they become performance standards that are often referred to as outcomes. These outcomes are rationalized as ways to get children 'ready for school, ready to 'succeed' in school, and to perform well on test of academic skills.² During discussions about standards and outcomes, allusions are frequently made to the 'delivery' of the curriculum (as in delivering the mail or the milk), and discussions of 'inputs' designed to produce specific 'outcomes' are increasingly frequent. Some even refer to child care and early childhood programs as an industry, rather than as a service.

It seems to me that using terms like *outcomes* and *performance standards* is based on an industrial or manufacturing analogy. In an industry, raw material is placed on an assembly line, and is then run through a sequence of processes, at the end of which out come identical shoes or cups or pencils or whatever else is being manufactured.

I suggest that a more appropriate way to assess provisions for our young children is to answer questions like "What does it feel like to be a child in this environment day after day after day?" This question provokes another one: "What experiences should all children have much of the time?" (not every minute). In other words, what *standards of experience* should we provide for our young children?

Below is a preliminary list of possible experiences that I suggest all children should have much of the time; the matter of exactly how much time is needed depends on many factors worthy of further discussion. Let's start with the following list:

- Feelings of belonging and feeling welcomed
- Feelings of being taken seriously and respected
- Feeling what it is like to understand some things better (or more deeply)
- Experience of applying their developing skills in purposeful and meaningful ways
- Being intellectually engaged and challenged
- Experience of overcoming setbacks and obstacles
- Experience of offering suggestions to peers and helping them understand something better
- Experience of taking initiative, appropriate responsibilities, making some choices, and so forth.

The first of the proposed experiences - **feelings of belonging and feeling welcomed** - is included to suggest that, on most days, a young child should feel welcomed and included as a member of a group. There may be one or two days over an extended period when the child experiences the feeling of wanting to be home, to be with family or siblings. His teachers can identify these moments and take the opportunity to reassure the child that he is welcome, and that going-home time will come soon.

The second item on this list - **feelings of being taken seriously and respected** - has long been a concern among those who care for young children; most likely in every profession several years of practice leads to automatic responses. Working daily over a long period of time with young children may account for frequent and almost automatic use of phrases that are warm and kind and positive, but that do not really take children seriously. I often observe busy and certainly well-meaning teachers saying to children every other minute: "Awesome;" "Super;" "Well done;" and many other positive, but empty phrases. Research on this 'over-justification effect' indicates that frequent praise lacking in content does not increase the desired behavior as well as does occasional, but informative, feedback.³

The third kind of experience listed above - **feeling what it is like to understand some things better (or more deeply)** - is included to emphasize that even very young children can benefit from deepening their understanding of matters - objects or events - in their own firsthand experience. Occasional experiences of that kind are likely to support the development of the disposition to seek in-depth understanding throughout life.

The fourth recommended experience - **experience of applying their developing skills in purposeful and meaningful ways** - relates to what it feels like for young children when they are engaged in a variety of projects during which they ask their teachers how to use their emerging skills like measuring things, writing titles and headings for their displays, and other contexts in which they are motivated to make sure that others can read the information they want to convey. (See for example the project titled Cheesy Pizza <http://ecrp.illinois.edu/v1ln2/gallick.html>) that shows children tracing and cutting, signing names to a thank-you letter, labeling knobs on a cardboard 'oven').

The fifth item - **being intellectually engaged and challenged** - is included to emphasize the value of frequently engaging young children's minds and resisting the temptation to revert to long-

standing traditions of too many experiences that are amusing or entertaining and exciting rather than interesting. The concept of interest refers to the capacity to lose oneself in a topic or activity, and to do so sufficiently to overcome setbacks and obstacles. We want to see this lifelong disposition early in young children; for that to happen, they need our support.

Similarly, the sixth item - experience of overcoming setbacks and obstacles - is included to suggest that occasional, real experiences of solving a problem, re-making something that was not successful the first time, and other experiences of overcoming difficulties can strengthen a child's confidence and become a lifelong disposition. The seventh and eighth suggestions on the list - experience of offering suggestions to peers and helping them understand something better and experience of taking initiative, appropriate responsibilities, making some choices, and so forth - refer to the importance not only of building and supporting the dispositions to interact positively and helpfully with peers, but in the processes of doing so, to learn many complex interactive skills.

The value of the suggested experiences on the end of this list are likely to form the basis for lifelong dispositions to participate in one's community and society responsibly and helpfully.

The list offered above can be amended, added to, and perhaps also reduced. I suggest that it could be useful for leaders, staff, *and* parents to come together to create their own list of answers to the question: "What experiences should our children have *much of the time* in their early years, and no doubt in their later years as well?"

Endnotes

- 1 Illinois State Board of Education: Division of Early Childhood Education (2004). Springfield, Illinois.
- 2 The Illinois benchmarks are currently undergoing review and revision.
- 3 Warneken, F., & Tomasella, M. (2008). Extrinsic rewards undermine altruistic tendencies in 20-month olds. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(6), 1785-1788.

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