

## Tripping over the stairs in the Race to the Top: The Common Core and Early Childhood

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After a decade of concerns and criticisms about the lack of rigorous national standards in the *No Child Left Behind* Act, we now have a set of ambitious standards for use nationwide—the Common Core State Standards. Since their formulation two years ago, these standards have been adopted by 45 states, were made a precondition for funding in the Race to the Top competition, and have begun to influence the development of new curricula and assessments. But early childhood education—concerned with children from birth to the end of third grade—seems nearly an afterthought in the standards. Not only do they end (or begin) at Kindergarten, ignoring more than half of the early childhood age range, they simply don't fit what we know about young children's learning and development.

No one, including early educators, can afford to overlook standards. They're critical for setting pedagogical goals and helping us know where we're going instructionally and what we can hope to accomplish once we get there. They're essential for establishing reasonable expectations or benchmarks for teaching and for deciding which curriculum to follow. And they're fundamental to conducting meaningful assessments. In some ways, you could say that we can't live—or at least teach effectively—without standards.

But it's not clear that early educators can live with them—or at least not live very comfortably with the way the Common Core standards are constructed. First, they are “top down.” Work on the standards began at the end of the chronological range, that is, at the

level of college and career readiness, and then was successively calibrated downwards by age and grade. By the time the authors came to K – 3, there was little room for flexibility. Some things that belong were omitted and some that don't were included.

Second, they represent sky high aspirations. Although many children will achieve the proficiency levels established by the Common Core, many more will not. When one recognizes that one-third of all students who took the 2009 NAEP reading test were unable to read at basic levels in fourth grade, you can see that these standards (which expect children to be able to read in Kindergarten) are set at too high a level.

Third, the standards are profoundly incomplete. They consist only of English Language Arts and Math, with a promise of science to come some time in the future. What about socio-emotional development? What about approaches to learning and the arts? What about executive function and self-regulation? What about motor and physical development? These are not unimportant domains of learning in early childhood; they are often the explicit path to achieving cognitive outcomes for young children. Don't forget that much of the evidence from longitudinal studies of the impact of early intervention tell us, in economist James Heckman's words, that "skills are multiple in nature. A proper accounting of human skills recognizes both cognitive and non-cognitive skills." We ignore them at our peril.

Finally, no link between standards, assessments, and curriculum exists at present. This is an issue that goes beyond early childhood since curriculum and assessment without standards are blind and, to turn a phrase coined by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, standards without curriculum and assessment are empty. We need all three elements—standards, assessments,

and curriculum—to create a meaningful educational program in early childhood or at any level. If we only have standards, it's like having a list of destinations without a map. We may be interested in reaching them, but we don't have any idea of how to get there or any way of knowing if we've arrived.

In short, the Common Core standards pose a set of significant dilemmas for early childhood. Although they've been embraced by states across the nation, top down standards such as those in the Common Core distort early learning. They're not sensitive to the learning patterns of young children and they impute too many of the skills of older children to those who are younger. If the difficulty level of the standards is too high, they won't be used, and if the domains covered by the standards are too narrow, they will have no lasting value.

Of all the problems posed by the Common Core the most significant may be how easily the standards can be transformed from benchmarks into thresholds. Instead of simply setting goals for student learning, they have the potential of being treated as prerequisites for student achievement so that all children who don't meet those requirements will be at risk of failure. In this way, a benchmark can be turned into a threshold, and a marker of achievement can become a barrier to learning.

The literacy scholar Elfrieda Hiebert reminds us that “When the steps are too big and when the capabilities of students do not match the size of the steps, the progression up the stairway of . . . complexity will likely be fraught with missteps and injuries.” Because of the way the K – 3 standards are constructed at present, they are likely to identify only a small proportion of students as successful and may label many more as failures. If this should

come to pass, the real failure will lie with the standards and their implementation, not the students. The size of the stair matters in the race to the top. It is time to revise the standards before too many children trip over the threshold of learning.

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