Preparing School Leaders for Young Learners in the United States

Maria Boeke Mongillo
Central Connecticut State University

Abstract

In the United States there has been a recent movement to expand access to preschool for children aged 3 to 4 through "universal pre-k" in states that fund programs for all age-eligible students. This has caused an increasing number of preschool programs to be housed in public schools and led by principals who often have little or no experience or training in early childhood. At the same time, the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) is taking hold and pressuring schools to utilize educational methods that are opposed to best practices in early childhood education. In response to current research about teaching and learning and challenges facing schools, the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership 2015 (PSEL 2015) were created to influence how leaders are prepared, hired, evaluated, and supported in their work. This article brings together these three current forces in public education in the US, and describes how they complement and conflict with each other. The underlying premise of this work is (a) to meet the PSEL 2015, leaders will need a greater understanding of early childhood education; (b) by understanding early childhood education, leaders will have an expanded framework from which to make decisions about how to address GERM; and (c) leaders need to find appropriate ways to respond to GERM in order to meet the PSEL 2015. Thus, developing a force of school leaders who understand and support best practices in ECE may ultimately improve learning outcomes for all students.

Keywords

preschool education, leadership, global education reform movement, early childhood education

Introduction

In the United States, preschool programs for children aged 3 and 4 vary significantly. Children may attend programs housed in public schools, in private or community centers, or in private homes. Some children may not go to preschool at all, entering kindergarten at age 5 or first grade at age 6 with no formal schooling experience. The decision to enroll children in a preschool program is made by parents and guardians, and often depends on complex factors such as accessibility, cost, program structure (e.g., full or half day), location, and transportation. Though the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offers accreditation of preschool programs and learning standards for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and the individual states have their own learning standards and regulations for early childhood programs, in practice preschool programs vary widely in terms of instruction,

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Maria Boeke Mongillo, Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Instructional Technology. Central Connecticut State University, 1615 Stanley Street
New Britain, CT 06050
Email: maria.boeke.mongillo@ccsu.edu

continues to demonstrate its importance on later preparation and certification of staff, and resources.

There has been a recent movement in the US to expand preschool programs as research learning outcomes for students. As of the 2016-17 fiscal year, 44 states provided some level of state funding for preschool programs and there has been a 47 percent increase in state pre-k funding over the last five years (Diffley, Parker, & Atchison, 2017). Many states are considering "universal pre-k," a model where states support financing of preschool for all age-eligible children regardless of a child's ability level or family income (Colker, 2008), though to date only three states have fully espoused this model (Mead, 2015). As this increase in early learning programs occurs, more preschool programs are being housed in public schools and led by public school leaders (Loewenberg, 2016; Shore, Shue, & Lambert, 2010; Szekely, 2013).

Public school principals, however, are unlikely to have had any training or experiences with early childhood programs (Bish, Shore, & Shue, 2011; Goncu, Main, Perone, & Tozer, 2014; Lieberman, 2016; Mead, 2011; Shore, Shue, & Lambert, 2010). Though state principal licensure standards require a higher level of education and both teaching and clinical experience, the vast majority of school leadership preparation programs, state licensure exams, and certification prerequisites do not mandate familiarity with early childhood topics (Clarke Brown, Squires, Connors-Tadros, & Horowitz, 2014; Lieberman, 2017).

Novice principals suggest knowledge and skills related to human relations, personnel, educational leadership, and curriculum as most important for their work in schools (Petzko, 2008), and these areas may need special consideration for ECE programs (Mead, 2011). Adding a preschool program is more complex than simply adding one more grade level, as it requires principals to have an understanding of teachers with different certifications, a

distinctive developmental period, and developmentally appropriate practices for designing curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Goncu et al., 2014). Principals who are charged with leading preschool programs indicate they need more training in areas of ECE curriculum and the developmental milestones of young children, appropriate behavioral expectations and disciplinary practices for preschoolers, and in how to provide instructional supervision to their ECE staff (Bish, Shore, & Shue, 2011; Shore, Shue, & Lambert, 2010). Additionally, principals express concerns about the particular licensing and regulations that pertain to younger students, as well as how to properly interact with the many outside agencies that support families and children (Bish, Shore, & Shue, 2011; Shore, Shue, & Lambert, 2010). Though states do require professional learning experiences for school leaders, they rarely focus on helping principals to develop the knowledge and skills needed to strengthen their ability to lead ECE programs (Lieberman, 2017).

While the US is considering expansion of preschool access, the global education reform movement (GERM) is taking greater hold and shifting work in schools to learning focused on basics, prescription, standardized testing, and test-based accountability (Sahlberg, 2012). Sahlberg (2011) described six principles of GERM: standardization in and of education, increased focus on literacy and numeracy, teaching for predetermined results, transfer of innovation from corporations to education, test-based accountability policies, and increased governmental control of schooling. These principles conflict with creating well-rounded citizens and sustaining school improvement (Robertson, 2015).

Additionally, these practices are opposed to the traditionally holistic, exploratory, and developmental nature of ECE. Thus the concern becomes the impact that GERM will have on pre-k programs if school leaders do not

understand the unique learning needs of early childhood students. Public educational policy has a significant influence on the practices of principals (Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010), and leaders will have to address GERM-related policies in their schools. Without familiarity with ECE principles and practices, principals may rely on their knowledge of, and experiences with, upper grades as they implement GERM-based policies (Goncu et al., 2014). Given the current social and political climate in the US, leaders may feel compelled to push students to engage with activities and topics that are not developmentally appropriate for their learning needs, may pressure teachers to structure their classrooms, instruction, and assessment in ways that contradict best practices for ECE (Mead, 2011), or focus on practices to improve standardized test scores (Goncu et al., 2014).

This gap in school leader knowledge also needs to be addressed if leaders are to meet the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015), a set of national guidelines for how leaders go about their work of supporting student learning. Leaders who are not well-versed in the needs of young learners can neither fully meet the standards nor reach the goal of educating and providing equitable opportunities for all students. Connecting ideas about best practices for ECE with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders may provide some strategies for educational leaders, leadership preparation programs, and policy makers to respond to the GERM in ways that benefit and support all learners.

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) developed the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 (PSEL 2015). The NPBEA is a group comprised of nine educational organizations responsible for the accreditation of leadership preparation programs and professional learning for practicing school administrators in the US. The PSEL 2015 were created to respond to current research regarding improving student learning and challenges facing education such as globalization and decreasing school budgets. By providing research-based guidelines, the PSEL 2015 hope to influence how leaders are prepared, hired, evaluated, and supported in their work.

The PSEL 2015 are organized around ten interconnected domains that reflect research- and practice-based qualities and values that impact student learning. The standards are as follows:

1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values
2. Ethics and Professional Norms
3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
4. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
5. Community of Care and Support for Students
6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel
7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff
8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community
9. Operations and Management
10. School Improvement

The PSEL 2015 state they are not a list of prescribed actions leaders should take in order to improve student achievement, but rather they are expectations for leaders to adapt and fit into their specific school and district contexts. Likewise, they recognize that the implementation of the standards may have particular issues or challenges in different situations, and thus need to be thoughtfully applied. Principals who have preschool programs in their buildings may need to consider how ECE should influence their understanding of and ability to apply the standards in their daily work.

PSEL 2015 Overarching Theme

Though the PSEL 2015 are comprised of ten different standard domains, they are guided by an overarching theme: leaders must focus on supporting the whole child[1] and the needs of each individual student. This idea aligns well with ECE as preschool teachers generally recognize they are helping students to grow cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally, and this is reflected in most preschool frameworks or standards for learning documents. However, it is unlikely school principals have had exposure to these early childhood frameworks and standards, or to the theories of child development and learning that have shaped the assumptions that form their foundations (Bish, Shore, & Shue, 2011; Goncu, Main, Perone, & Tozer, 2014; Lieberman, 2016; Mead, 2011; Shore, Shue, & Lambert, 2010). This gap in leader knowledge is of concern because school leaders play an important role in shaping the culture of the school, instructional practices, and student outcomes (Szekely, 2013), and leaders have been integral to the success of ECE programs (Ritchie, Phillips, & Garrett, 2016).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

In the US there is a set of guiding principles of early learning put forth by NAEYC (2009) called Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). These principles are applicable to all aspects of ECE across its varied settings. DAP connects theories of child development, ideas about children's social and cultural contexts, and knowledge of individual children into a set of 12 principles for educators to consider when working with children from birth through age eight. The 12 principles of DAP (NAEYC, n.d.) include:

All areas of development and learning are important.

1. Learning and development follow sequences.

2. Development and learning proceed at varying rates.
3. Development and learning result from an interaction of maturation and experience.
4. Early experiences have profound effects on development and learning.
5. Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacities.
6. Children develop best when they have secure relationships.
7. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.
8. Children learn in a variety of ways.
9. Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation and promoting language, cognition, and social competence.
10. Development and learning advance when children are challenged.
11. Children's experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning.

In addition to the twelve principles, NAEYC (2009) provided guidelines to help educators apply DAP in their classrooms in five key areas of practice: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance development and learning, planning curriculum to achieve important goals, assessing children's development and learning, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families.

These DAP principles and guidelines are largely in contradiction to GERM. While DAP recognizes that learning occurs when children are provided challenging work and held to high standards, it also notes children develop at differing rates based in part on their individual maturity levels, and experiences. Thus, to follow the DAP principles and guidelines, teachers have to provide individualized learning experiences for students based upon their needs, readiness, and abilities. GERM principles, on the other hand, begin with the understanding that clear and high standards are important for student

learning, but encourage standardization and homogenization of teaching and learning (Robertson, 2015).

DAP also espouses educating the whole child, understanding that young children need opportunities to grow cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally. It is the job of the educator to provide learning experiences in the classroom that support all areas of development. GERM, however, focuses on basic skills, particularly literacy and numeracy (Sahlberg, 2011). Further, the emphasis on basic skills opposes the DAP premise that young children acquire knowledge and skills through play, i.e., that children learn best when they experience hands-on, engaging activities that tap into their natural curiosity in a social learning environment (Morrow, 2009). The teaching of basic skills is often characterized by rote memorization, drills, and completion of worksheets, practices that are inappropriate for preschool children, and which may not be most effective for encouraging student engagement at any level.

Furthermore, DAP recognizes learning as a function of both maturation and experience, noting each child reaches developmental milestones at his or her own pace depending on internal and external stimuli. While there are expected ages by which children typically master certain cognitive, physical, behavioral, and social skills, they are marked by a range rather than a hard and fast age (Sousa, 2011). To meet these varied individual student needs, early educators, using a DAP approach, work to recognize the range of developmental levels in their classrooms and adjust instruction accordingly. GERM expects teachers to use safe, low risk strategies to achieve pre-determined results. It diminishes teacher innovation and creativity, and undermines teachers' autonomy, which contradicts the belief that teachers are trained professionals who know what is best for the students they encounter in their classrooms every day (Sahlberg, 2011). ECE teachers,

however, require the freedom to create or select the best instructional practices and learning activities, especially given the wide range of student abilities they are likely to face in their classes (Goldstein, 2008).

DAP guidelines also specify the need to use assessment as a tool for planning, instruction, and evaluation. The guidelines support sound assessment that takes into consideration individual needs, such as the cultural contexts of the student or whether a child is an English language learner. Additionally, the guidelines encourage the use of multiple modes of assessment including performance-based tasks, teacher observations, family checklists or interviews, and analysis of student work, while GERM pushes schools to rely on standardized testing and to measure teacher accountability using test scores (Sahlberg, 2011). While this method of calculating teacher effectiveness can be troublesome at all grade levels, it is particularly so in ECE. With the focus on the development of the whole child, many skills and abilities are not captured in standardized scores, thus making it very difficult to measure teacher success in terms of numerical testing results.

Standards Not Standardization

Because of the contradictions noted above, some ECE groups have adopted a stance that opposes GERM and its focus on standardization while remaining committed to high-quality standards for young learners and ECE professionals. The tension between the "colliding worlds" (McCabe & Sipple, 2011, p. 8) of DAP and GERM, the apparently opposing forces of what constitutes good individual learning experiences for young children found in ECE settings and the pressure for standardization and accountability found in other school settings, often leaves preschool and kindergarten teachers struggling to respond (Goldstein, 2008; McCabe & Sipple, 2011). ECE teachers may feel the fundamental principles that underlie their practices are being called into

question (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

According to Katz (2015), however, framing the ECE debate around these two issues limits the conversation. The idea of having common goals is not the concern, but it is the types of goals set for children that matter. Katz (2015, p. 2) advocated for "intellectual goals" which encourage reasoning, questioning, analyzing, and predicting, over "academic goals" which support learning individual pieces of information that often relate to numeracy and literacy in the early grades. Likewise, the NAEYC (2002) and Defending the Early Years (DEY, 2015) both describe how standards in ECE can be a meaningful way to ensure high-quality learning experiences for all children. ECE standards need to be developmentally appropriate and assessed in ways that accommodate the many variations in children's backgrounds, languages, and experiences; developed in conjunction with ECE professionals; and implemented in the classroom by well-prepared and supported teachers (DEY, 2015; NAEYC, 2002). Meier (2002) pronounced this idea in the broader educational systems as focusing on standards not standardization.

Goldstein (2008), conversely, argued that the socio-political factors that influence a child must be incorporated into the classroom in order for practices to be developmentally appropriate. She viewed GERM and the standardization movement as part of those larger political and social forces that affect children. Thus she suggested the types of teaching practices and philosophies espoused by GERM should be incorporated into the ECE classroom in order meet a fundamental goal of DAP which is to help children learn to navigate their larger world. Goldstein (2008) warned, however, that this rationale could be used to justify ECE classrooms using the worksheets and seatwork found in upper grades rather than the active, experiential activities that foster the growth of the whole child. To avoid this, she

advocated that ECE professionals should have a deep knowledge of content and a thorough understanding of how young children learn. This would allow practitioners to make informed and responsible choices about their teaching practices and how they meet the specific needs of their students.

Furthermore, critics of DAP suggest it actually espouses some of the fundamental ideas that underlie GERM. Like GERM, DAP has become a globalized model for ECE (Penn, 2002). By dividing children's experience into the categories of physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development, DAP standardizes (Penn, 2002) and "homogenises" children (Woodhead, 2006, p. 17). The idea that children pass through specific stages of development discounts the significant impact of society and culture, and the influence a child's race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and other factors have on the growth trajectory of a child (Woodhead, 2006). It has also led to increased control of ECE programs and less teacher autonomy, encouraging a mindset that all children follow similar patterns of development and that they can and should be expected to have similar academic outcomes if the right educational treatment is applied (Penn, 2002). Though these similarities exist, DAP at its foundation supports learning through play and social interactions with peers and adults, opposes rote memorization and standardized testing, and encourages a holistic view of children, all of which contrast GERM.

The Intersection of ECE, PSEL 2015, and GERM

Best practices for ECE as expressed in the DAP principles and guidelines oppose many of the ideas and assumptions embedded in GERM. In order for school leaders to fully realize the nature and quality of work outlined by the PSEL 2015, they must understand instructional practices that meet the needs of all learners, including those for preschool students. Thus,

providing leaders with a knowledge of DAP and other best practices in ECE related to children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development, play-based learning, and the assessment of young children may also help leaders discover how to implement instructional practices to respond to GERM by adapting ECE philosophies and practices for use in upper level classrooms. The importance of leaders understanding ECE to fully meet each standard and the way in which fully meeting each standard prevents GERM from taking over varies in each of the ten PSEL 2015.

Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Core Values

"Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of *each* student" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 9).

Included in this standard are the ideas that the school's mission, vision, and core values drive the all efforts of the school and every aspect of the leader's work. These defining statements are not merely words on paper, but the rationale behind, and impetus for, all school actions and decisions. A key role of any leader is the development of the school climate and culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998), and the mission, vision, and core values are a visible description of the leader's ideas of what the culture should be.

The PSEL 2015 also suggest the mission and vision need to be living statements, adjusted to meet the needs of students and the school as they change. One such change in a school and its student population may be the addition of a pre-k program. According to Mead (2012), the inclusion of preschool and kindergarten in the school's mission and vision statements are an important part of creating an instructional climate and culture that support early learning. Principals need to view early learning as an integral part of the larger continuum of learning,

rather than as an optional learning experience. To be successful, the young students and their teachers must be valued as equal members of the school community and full participants in all aspects of school life both within and outside the classroom. Goncu et al. (2014) suggested that principals are more likely to fully integrate ECE into the life of the school when they have a deep understanding of its significance, and that principals who are unable to incorporate ECE may harm program effectiveness.

Creating a comprehensive mission, vision, and core values that include early childhood programs may be one strategy for leaders to mediate the influence of GERM. For a leader to fully meet Standard 1 if they have an ECE program in their school, the mission, vision, and core values must reflect DAP and the holistic philosophies underlying instructional practices in ECE. If the leader uses the mission to promote academic success and well-being of students, works to strategically implement actions to achieve the vision, and models and pursues the mission, vision, and core values in all aspects of leadership, the leader will be creating an environment and encouraging instructional practices supported by DAP. In this way, including ECE in the mission and vision can support all learners.

Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms

"Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 10).

One part of this standard addresses the need for leaders to act in ways that are transparent and fair, and that promote collaboration, trust, learning, and continuous improvement. This standard also regards schools as mechanisms for promoting social justice and equity, and assigns leaders responsibility for each student's success as learners and as well-rounded individuals.

In order for leaders to behave ethically in their guidance of preschool programs, leaders must have knowledge of young children's developmental stages and needs. By advocating for and developing high-quality preschool programs leaders can potentially support positive learning progress and lower the need for expensive interventions later in a student's academic career (Szekely, 2013). The decisions a principal makes about early learning programs under his or her control can have significant impact later in a student's life.

Additionally, principals confess they often hire teachers for ECE classrooms based more upon personality traits than content knowledge (Cook, 2016). This can be especially troubling in a subject like math, where content-specific knowledge and skills follow a linear trajectory (Mongillo, 2017). To be successful, ECE teachers need to understand how the topics they teach relate to and lay the foundation for more complicated ideas later. Also, without a deep knowledge of content, ECE teachers may not be able to identify and correct student misconceptions in effective ways. Furthermore, principals admit they often hire teachers with broader certification grade spans[2] because it allows them more flexibility in moving them to other classrooms as needed from year to year (Cook, 2016). If leaders have a comprehension of the significance of early learning and the complexity involved in teaching young children, they may be more likely to make informed and ethical choices about distribution of resources and hiring teachers.

To meet Standard 2, a leader must act ethically in all areas of leadership, including relationship-building, decision-making, and resource distribution. The six principles of GERM oppose best practices in ECE, which suggests that ethical leaders will need to be aware of that influence if they are going to meet the needs of each student. GERM may have educators pushing children to engage in activities that are not developmentally appropriate, holding them to behavioral standards not aligned to their maturational level, or assessing them in ways that are unable to accurately capture their knowledge and skills. A leader who understands young children and strives to act ethically will support instruction in and hire teachers for early childhood classrooms keeping in mind each young student's learning needs.

Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

"Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11).

To meet this standard, leaders must get to know their students' strengths, diversity, and culture and accept them as assets rather than deficits to learning. Additionally, leaders need to challenge stereotypes about and maintain high standards for all students regardless of race, class, culture, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or special status.

While having educators approach student diversity as a strength and asset is important for all students, it is especially so for young learners. Young children observe the differences among people and form attitudes about different groups (York, 2003). Preschool age children are developing a sense of their own and others' identities, trying to define how they view themselves and others (Hendrick & Wiseman, 2011). This suggests even young children need access to a culturally responsive and multicultural education to help them develop the knowledge and skills they will need to function in a diverse, global society as adults. Additionally, the US has shifting racial and ethnic demographics, with an increasing percentage of non-white people and English Language Learners (Cohn, 2016; US Department of Education, 2016), and population trends indicate these transformations in the make-up of

student bodies will be increasingly present in the younger grades before moving their way up through the schools.

Having a diversity-oriented mindset may help leaders meet Standard 3 and address the conflicting messages GERM may send. GERM demands a standardization of curriculum, instruction, and assessment while at the same time expecting predetermined results. Given the diversity of students, these ideas may work against each other. Students of diverse backgrounds may approach learning from different perspectives and thus may require other ways to access the curriculum, demonstrate their learning, and achieve the same educational outcomes. Principals who understand this can advocate for and support the use of varied, culturally responsive techniques in classrooms at all levels.

Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

"Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 12).

With this standard, leaders are expected to use their knowledge of child development and learning and best methods of instruction to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices that are aligned and focused across grade levels. Furthermore, it specifies curriculum and instruction should be rigorous, authentic, and differentiated to meet student needs. Assessment practices should be valid and developmentally appropriate, with data used fittingly to monitor and advance student learning.

Of all the standards, this may be the one of most importance for educators to consider when determining the value of principals having specific knowledge of best practices for ECE. Standard 4 addresses the interactions that happen in the instructional core, defined as

students and teachers in the presence of content (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). This is the day-to-day work happening in schools, and where student learning is most influenced.

In describing what should be happening in ECE classrooms, DAP explicitly expresses the importance of play as a vehicle for fostering learning in young children. Though adults may view pretend play as relaxing and fun, it is actually an intellectually demanding and cognitively complex task (Segal, 2004), requiring children to combine memory and experiences together to make meaning (Roskos & Christie, 2001). Similar cognitive strategies are necessary for literacy and other learning tasks. Young learners need to be able to interact physically with the world around them in order to construct knowledge, yet many principals lack an understanding of how to balance play-based learning with other academic activities (Lieberman & Cook, 2016).

The question of how much play should be included in ECE arises in part from the impact of GERM. Principals describe the pressures they feel to reduce time for play in the early grades and instead focus on academic activities (Lieberman & Cook, 2016), explaining how academic expectations have risen in the early grades. Some may also have difficulty seeing that for young children play *is* learning. Since principals create the culture of learning in their schools, allot time and resources for instructional activities, and evaluate and supervise teachers, it is important for them to understand how play in the early grades is a valuable and necessary instructional activity. Appropriate mentoring and supervision is an important contribution to ECE teacher quality (Fulgini, Howes, Lara-Cinisomo, & Karoly, 2009). Without understanding ECE, principals may be encouraging practices that make ECE classrooms function like upper grade levels and possibly contradict the support of early learning (Lieberman & Cook, 2016; Szekely, 2013).

Leaders also need to understand early

childhood development. Mead (2012) suggested that successful leaders of ECE programs advocate for an inclusive curriculum that includes the arts, science, physical education, and history, aligning the curriculum and sequence learning across grade levels. Doing this makes sure learning progresses from simple to more complex, and from concrete to more abstract concepts. Yet, in order to do this work, the leader must understand the developmental levels of young children in an informed and appropriate manner.

One GERM feature is a preoccupation with literacy and numeracy, a focus on basic skills, but young children need learning experiences focused on the whole child. Robertson (2015) argued the focus on basic knowledge reduces student creativity and ingenuity, the types of skills students will need to function as adults in a changing society. For principals to avoid the pressure to focus all learning on formally tested skills like language arts and math, they need to view students from a holistic perspective. Understanding and embracing the principles of ECE, may help leaders to formulate a mindset that approaches the work of schools from a broader, more inclusive point of view.

Another aspect of Standard 4 is the leader's role in assessment of student learning. Mead (2011) noted successful ECE principals are able to work with teachers to collect and analyze data, and then use the data to plan and implement instruction. To do this with early childhood teachers, leaders have to recognize that young children demonstrate their learning in different ways than older students (Howard & Bornfreund, 2014). While direct assessments of literacy and numeracy skills are useful, to get a full picture of student growth and learning requires assessments across different domains over time. Assessments are most accurate and useful when they are embedded into the daily work of young students.

GERM, however, has a preoccupation with test-based accountability that can drive leaders to expect teachers to use paper and pencil assessments that cannot capture the learning of young children. Principals instead need to validate alternative ways of measuring student progress such as performance-based tasks, teacher observations, family checklists or interviews, and analysis of student work. Leaders who do this can support teachers in upper levels in using alternative methods of assessment as well, resulting in better learning experiences for all students.

Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students

"Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of *each* student" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 13).

Through this standard, leaders are expected promote a culture that ensures students are being supported not only through their interactions with teachers about content, but also with additional services and extracurricular activities that help to meet their needs. The leader needs to work to develop relationships among all members of the school community that support positive social and emotional learning, and also to create a school environment that is safe and supports healthy physical growth.

While healthy relationships within the school are important for all students, they are particularly so for young children. Young children learn best when they have secure relationships with the adults in the classroom. Young children's development in all areas is profoundly influenced by the quality and stability of their relationships. Having nurturing relationships with adults at an early age fosters healthy social and emotional behaviors later in life. In schools, young children who feel they have a positive and caring relationship with their teachers tend to be more excited about school

and have higher levels of achievement (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Leaders need to recognize the significance of stable and secure relationships and create an environment that is supportive of the work early childhood educators do. Early childhood teachers who are not able to utilize the instructional practices they know are best for young learners, an issue that may arise when implementing GERM principles, may leave their placement or give up teaching as a career (Whitebook et al., 2009). Given the importance of stable, caring relationships for preschool children, staff turnover is especially detrimental in ECE. Leaders need to have an understanding of this emotional need to support teacher practices, but also to staff ECE classrooms and limit class size so there are enough adults to foster deep relationships with each child.

Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel

"Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 14).

Within this standard, leaders are to focus on supporting teachers and staff from the recruiting and hiring process through to their retirement by offering professional learning opportunities that help all to continually develop and improve their practice. Additionally, this standard encourages the development of teacher leaders through distributing leadership tasks and improving the individual capacity of all members of the school community.

Teachers are the most important school-based influence on student learning (Hattie, 2012). Thus, it is the job of the principal to provide appropriate professional development opportunities to help struggling teachers learn to implement strategies to improve student success, and to help proficient teachers continue to hone, refine, and update their practices. For early childhood teachers, opportunities for professional development should include participation in learning with the rest of the school and in training specifically targeted to address topics in ECE. (Loewenberg, 2016). They also need to engage in professional learning that addresses instructional planning, curriculum development, and student data analysis both with their own and other grade levels (Mead, 2011).

Ongoing, focused professional development for teachers appears to be especially important for improving teacher quality in ECE (Fulgini et al., 2009). A particular challenge for preschool teachers in a public school setting is that they may be the only pre-k teacher in the building. They may have access to reading material about best practices and research in ECE, but little opportunity to view, reflect on, and discuss actual classroom instruction utilizing strategies that are known to encourage student success (Ritchie, Phillips, & Garrett, 2016). They may have the chance to engage in vertically aligned professional learning experiences with other teachers across the ECE kindergarten through grade 3 continuum, but unable to have frequent horizontal conversations with other pre-k teachers.

For leaders to meet Standard 6, they must have an understanding of child growth and development and of high-quality learning experiences at each age in order to determine how professional resources will be allocated. This will help them decide if school or district-wide professional development initiatives are developmentally appropriate for preschool learners. Likewise, they can better determine what unique professional learning opportunities their preschool teachers should have, perhaps looking beyond the school or district to connect single teachers to other ECE professionals.

Additionally, leaders should support teacher leadership. Being able to do this, in part, requires leaders to recognize the gaps in their own knowledge. Regarding ECE at the most

fundamental level, this means leaders have to understand that young learners have unique learning needs, and that if they are unable to fully discuss and support teachers in meeting those needs, they should offer leadership roles to the ECE professionals who can. Principals also need to make a purposeful decision to encourage leadership among ECE professionals. Often early childhood teachers become leaders by default, with little training or support, in part because they are isolated from other teachers (Maxfield, Ricks-Doneen, Klocko, & Sturges, 2011). In systems where school leaders support ECE, create a continuum of learning from preschool through the upper grades, and provide high-quality professional development, early childhood teacher leaders are most successful.

Leaders who provide the opportunity for their ECE teachers to observe and discuss best practices on a regular basis can reassure teachers as they continue to use DAP to drive their work. This requires principals to work against GERM's reliance on corporations as the best sources of educational innovation as an underlying belief is that businesses and other institutions outside of schools can better determine what should be happening inside schools. GERM's focus on bringing in ideas from outside undermines teachers and deters them from learning from each other. Standard 6 expects leaders to empower teachers to engage in continuous learning and improvement.

Standard 7: Professional Community for Teachers and Staff

"Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teacher and other professional staff to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 15).

Standard 7 focuses on creating the conditions and culture within the school to build collective capacity. This standard urges leaders to put in place systems and structures that allow teachers to collaborate on examining student data, providing instructional feedback, and developing practice. It also supports teacher-driven professional learning initiatives that are tightly aligned to actual classroom practice.

For school leaders to support pre-k learning environments, they need to envision teaching as a collaborative rather than an isolated practice, and provide opportunities for teachers to engage in planning across grade levels (Mead, 2011). Leaders need to allow teachers time for shared planning and collaborative analysis of student data as single and multiple grade level teams. Additionally, building shared capacity of teachers may help schools make better decisions about how and when to implement GERM principles. If the principal can validate the work of ECE professionals by including them in the professional learning community of the school, then preschool teachers can model instructional and assessment practices that are more student-centered. While all practices may not be appropriate for upper grades, many can be scaled up for use with older students.

Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

"Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 16).

To meet this standard, leaders will look beyond the building walls and create positive relationships and have reciprocal conversations with families and the community about the strengths, challenges, needs, and accomplishments of the school. The leader will utilize community resources and make connections with community partners that can help support student learning.

Developing quality relationships with parents, families, and communities is important for schools as it has an impact on student achievement and multiple other positive

learning outcomes (Morrison, 2009). These connections to family and community are even more crucial to the success of pre-k programs, as DAP is grounded in educators understanding the contexts in which children learn and develop. Young children begin learning well before they enter any formal schooling (Mead, 2011), and it is up to schools to develop the reciprocal relationships necessary to engage in communication, information sharing, and mutual decision-making to help young learners achieve cognitive, physical, social, and emotional learning goals.

For leaders to meet Standard 8, it is important for them to understand the specific types of relationships they need to develop to support young learners. Principals who are responsible for leading pre-k programs in their buildings need to work toward building trust with families and encouraging a sense of shared responsibility for student learning (Loewenberg, 2016). They should help teachers bring parents into the school and communicate with parents outside as well, perhaps considering the use of home visits. Additionally, multiple outside agencies are often involved in supporting pre-k students. Principals state they feel adept at working with school nurses, counselors, and other support staff, but express concerns about how to manage the different outside groups who may need to be consulted or included in meeting student needs (Bish, Shore, & Shue, 2011).

Even if their schools do not house preschool classrooms, principals need to develop relationships with the community preschools and early care providers who are sending children to their schools once they reach kindergarten or first grade (Bornfreund, 2016; Loewenberg, 2016; Mead, 2011). Forming these relationships can help ease the transition from preschool into kindergarten or first grade for children. Community partnerships can also lead to increased communication, a sense of communal responsibility for educating young children, common expectations for student

learning and development, and possibly shared professional development experiences for all ECE professionals.

Developing strong relationships with families and the community may also help leaders to reduce the impact of GERM's increase of school control. Sahlberg (2011) suggested the focus on data and outside control of schools can force teachers to implement centrally mandated instructional practices or policies that may not be in the best interest of the children in their classrooms. If leaders are having open communication with stakeholders about the strengths, challenges, needs, and accomplishments of the school, leaders and stakeholders may be able to develop more thorough and mutual understandings of what students need to be successful. If all stakeholders share similar ideas about how to support student learning, teachers may feel more freedom to be educational professionals and to use practices that really impact student learning, rather than the latest fad techniques or packaged curricula advertised by corporations. This may be especially important in ECE where GERM and the push for the use of standardized testing to measure student performance creates pressure downward into ECE (Lieberman & Cook, 2016). Parents and community members may think they want to see ECE classrooms functioning like those in older grades, but principals who have built trusting relationships and understand ECE can explain why young learners need a different kind of learning environment to be successful.

Standard 9: Operations and Management
"Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 17).

Standard 9 involves a leader's ability to manage the physical, financial, instructional, and human resources to support student learning and school improvement. It includes

understanding and complying with legal and contractual obligations and policies at the local, state, and federal levels, and making decisions to help sustain enrollment.

An important part of a principal's management role is effectively assigning teachers to classroom placements where they can best utilize their teaching strengths. Fuller and Ladd (2012) found school leaders had a tendency to move stronger teachers to the upper grade levels, especially to grades where students participated in standardized testing. Likewise, principals admit to moving weak teachers to the younger grades (Cook, 2016). Yet there are indications that students who do not master certain skills in the early grades will continue to lag behind. For example, the vast majority of students who are struggling readers in third grade are likely to still be struggling readers in ninth grade (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996). School leaders need to understand the critical role preschool plays in laying the foundation for future learning so they can make informed decisions about how to staff their classrooms in ways that will best support student learning.

Additionally, to meet Standard 9 principals need to know and comply with laws, policies, and regulations. While some legal standards and regulations apply across schools regardless of the grade levels they serve, there may be specific program standards in place within which early childhood programs must operate (Darragh, 2010). For example, many states have policies for student-teacher ratios, hand-washing practices, and safety that differ from those for older students. Yet these policies vary by state and by program location (Horowitz, 2016). In some states preschools housed in public schools are exempt, but in others they are not. A principal needs to know which laws, policies, and regulations apply to their programs so they can make appropriate decisions about staffing, scheduling, budgeting for materials, and assigning classrooms.

In managing and monitoring the operations of the school and its systems, school leaders need to be aware of GERM's roots in a market-driven approach to education and the influence it may have on their decisions. Sahlberg (2011) suggested applying an economy-based mindset encourages schools to focus on competition, efficiency, and productivity over student learning. Practices like moving weaker teachers to lower, untested grades can be an indication of this kind of thinking. Additionally, if leaders are unaware of the laws, regulations, and policies that apply to ECE programs and make decisions based on market-oriented principles, they may encourage or implement practices that put their programs in violation of the laws and potentially put young students at risk.

Standard 10: School Improvement

"Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 18).

To meet this standard, leaders must evaluate educational trends for applicability in their school settings and balance the political, uncertain, and often competing influences on education. It also instructs leaders to consider school improvement from a systems approach, understanding how all aspects of the school work together to influence student learning.

To meet Standard 10, principals need to bring together all of the expectations of the other PSEL 2015 into a clear, consistent, and continuous process to support improved student learning outcomes. To be an "agent of continuous improvement" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 18), leaders must: implement their vision, mission, and core values; develop the capacity of their staff; promote teacher leadership; work with all stakeholders to form mutual commitments and responsibility for student learning; and focus school efforts on effectively meeting the needs of students (NPBEA, 2015). For leaders to be

successful in reaching these goals for young children, they need to have the knowledge of how each of these areas looks in ECE.

Furthermore, principals need to strongly consider the impact of GERM on students. As mentioned throughout, GERM principles contradict DAP and other best practices in ECE. Though there may be pressure to implement GERM's ideas, Standard 10 at its most fundamental level states leaders must have a commitment to instructional practices and systems that foster improvement. In other words, it implies that if GERM is not working for students, leaders should refine it or reject it in order to meet their students' needs.

Conclusion

Effective school leadership and high-quality early childhood education programs have a strong link to positive outcomes for students throughout their educational careers (Szekely, 2013). While DAP principles and guidelines are specifically designed to meet the needs of young learners from birth to age 8, many of the underlying ideas behind them can help educators understand how to structure educational opportunities in contrast to GERM. As principals continue the challenging and complex work associated with meeting the PSEL 2015 standards and responding to the pressures of GERM, they will benefit from a solid understanding of ECE.

If principals are going to meet the goal of improving outcomes for all students, states and school districts need to support those who lead ECE programs. One option for states is to require principals to graduate from their preparation programs with an understanding of child development, curriculum for preschool students, DAP, and family and community engagement strategies (Bornfreund & Lieberman, 2016; Lieberman, 2017). Ryan et al. (2011) propose the development of a set of specific pre-k to grade 3 competencies for school leaders. Principals would also benefit from the

opportunity to participate in an ECE internship or other clinical experience to hone their knowledge and skills. Alternatively, states can require elementary teaching experience for leaders who receive a certification that includes ECE grades (Lieberman, 2017).

Moreover, states and school districts can offer leaders professional learning opportunities that focus on ECE (Bornfreund & Lieberman, 2016; Lieberman, 2017). This type of experience ought to be mandatory for leaders who do not have a background in ECE. Additionally, states and school districts could find ways to connect principals with early childhood center directors. This can encourage conversation and growth for all ECE professionals, and strengthen the alignment across community and school-based programs. Also states should take advantage of federal funding opportunities to support this work. The United States recently authorized an educational law with a focus on ECE that allows federal money to be used for early education initiatives (Bornfreund, & Lieberman, 2016).

Furthermore, Lieberman (2017) proposed the development of a system to track elementary principal turnover. The data collected by states or school districts can help pinpoint the areas of concern for school leaders and be used to develop supports that will keep principals in place. The turnover of leadership often interrupts meaningful school reforms. At this particular point in time when the number of ECE programs is increasing and the pressures of GERM-based policies are pushing down into the lower grades, the need for schools to retain leaders who can consistently implement best practices in ECE becomes ever more crucial.

Failing to make sure school leaders have a deep understanding of DAP, child development, and best practices in ECE pedagogy and assessment could have a number of implications. To begin with, young children may be asked to engage with learning activities and assessments that are not age-appropriate. GERM's focus on basic skills and standardized testing pulls away

from play-based learning and authentic assessments. Likewise, children may be held to behavioral expectations and exposed to classroom management strategies that do not align with their developmental needs. Parents and the community can exacerbate these pressures if the leader is unable to clearly communicate a rationale for why there are differences between ECE classrooms and those of older students. Additionally, leaders may move stronger teachers to grades where standardized testing occurs. All of these issues can lead to high levels of ECE teacher turnover, and when combined these concerns may result in a decrease in ECE program effectiveness and limit outcomes for young learners.

As put forth in the PSEL 2015 document, "Educational leaders need ongoing support to succeed in a job that is dramatically changing" (NPBEA, 2015, p.6). As principals' work changes to include responsibility for preschool programs, they require better preparation as they enter the field and professional learning opportunities as they continue to practice. Developing a force of school leaders who understand and support best practices in ECE may ultimately improve learning outcomes for all students.

Notes

1. The term, "whole child," in the United States, is a popular term that refers to the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social needs of children that may be met in school.

2. In the US it is common for states to issue teaching certificates for a range of grades, e.g., k-2, 3-6, etc. A k-6 certification, for example, would encompass all the elementary school grades

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About the Author

Maria Boeke Mongillo, EdD, is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Central Connecticut State University. She coordinates the MS program in Teacher Leadership, and teaches across the MS, Sixth Year, and Doctoral programs in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Instructional Technology. Currently, her research focus is on the preparation of school leaders for meeting the unique needs of early childhood students and on the implementation and effectiveness of teacher evaluation models. Her past research and publications have focused on developing teacher self-efficacy, particularly for math and science, and on cultivating disciplinary literacy in preschool through high school settings.