The Complexity of Dis/Continuity as Policy

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Abstract

In this article we share stories of children's and families' transitions as they move through early care and education systems in the United States. As part of the institutionalism of childhood (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), there are public policies being implemented at the local, state, and national levels based on the concept of "continuity" that impact children and families. We discuss the assumptions that underline the concept of continuity in hopes to make complex the multiple perspectives and resulting policy agendas set forth in the name of continuity.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Continuity/Discontinuity

Introduction

Since the 1990s the term "continuity," coupled with other related terms such as "transition," "readiness," and "partnership," has often appeared in early childhood education literature both within the United States and globally (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Bennett & Tayler, 2006). The complexity of continuity means such concepts can be used in different ways to describe different things and fit different purposes. Research studies and policy documents have used the concept of continuity in various contexts to argue for such topics as: better classroom environments, the relationship between schools and communities; smooth and successful transitions to elementary school; coordination or integration of services and agencies; cultural responsiveness with a focus on the home school connection; and coherent state data systems for measuring and monitoring the development of children and their academic progress.

Across these varied contexts, creating greater continuity in children's experience is presented as necessarily good and desirable for the healthy growth and development of young children. This is an idea grounded in the logic of binary opposition to "discontinuity." Sampson summarizes the significance of Derrida's work critiquing either/or dualism in Western thought:

> Derrida argues that in whatever we take to be immediate and present there is always already absence, difference and deferral. If presence always contains absence, there cannot be a neatly drawn line of opposition between two notions. It is not that presence and absence are opposite, not that there is either presence or absence, but rather that there is an inevitable defining of the one through the other, there is both presence and absence (Sampson, 1989 p. 12).

The meaning of continuity, in Derrida's (1982) view, depends on what it is not - discontinuity. However, continuity in the binary opposition is always given a more privileged position as a foundation for setting program goals in childcare and education agencies, as well as developing various policy agendas at institutional and system levels.

In considering the international body of scholarship that may have contributed to the emergence of practices of continuity and policies that promote continuity in the US, several aspects of continuity trace back to Fredric Froebel's work (Froebel & Herford, 1916). Froebel's kindergarten emphasized the importance of continuity in education as being essential for the child; and, as such, he voiced concern about the absence of connection and transition in education:

> Education to be worthy of a human being must, therefore, be continuous, must proceed upon the same plan from the beginning, though in a progressive sequence, according to the natural stages of development. The first playthings must stand in proper social relation to the last, the first elementary lesson must be in connection with the topmost pinnacles of later knowledge…. nowhere, in short, is continuity in the lessons, occupations and lives of children so much as thought of (Barnard, 1881, p. 225).

Just as Froebel asserted continuity as essential for children's development, many educators and policymakers in the US have advocated for policies and practices that are designed to increase continuity in the lives and education of children (Scully, Seefeldt, & Barbour, 1993).

The value of discontinuity is rarely discussed, nor is it portrayed as a desirable process or outcome in the field of education (Fthenakis, 1998). However, the selected interview transcripts presented in this article create a space to more closely examine the interconnectedness of continuity and discontinuity in early childhood, demonstrating it is not possible to draw a line dividing continuity from discontinuity or *vice versa*. What we think of as continuity, or what seems to be continuous, simultaneously means discontinuity; or in order to create continuity, we first need to discontinue. The stories children, families, and teachers shared through the interview transcripts address this complexity and question the givenness and normative values assigned to continuity in the binary. In doing so, we do not mean to reverse the hierarchy of the binary nor do we want to replace continuity with discontinuity. Rather, we aim to challenge the function of the opposition itself by rendering both continuity and discontinuity visible (also see Jozwiak, Cahill, & Theilheimer, 2016 for a full discussion).

In this article, largely based on the context of policies and practices in the US, we argue that a number of current policy initiatives and reform efforts construct continuity as normative policy solutions or fixed goals, reducing or even closing down complexity in relation to ways of being and doing things in early childhood education and care. In developing this argument, we first focus on noticeable interpretations of dis/continuity. We then examine current policy and reform efforts to create dis/continuity in the field through building four early childhood subsystems: the "Quality Rating and

Improvement System" (known in the US simply as "QRIS") (See Cannon, Zellman, Karoly, & Schwartz, 2017) professional learning and workforce development; early learning standards; and child outcome data systems. Contesting the normative concept of continuity, we draw on insights from complexity approaches in education that "see the non-linear, unpredictable and generative character of educational processes and practices in a positive light, focusing on the emergence of meaning, knowledge and understanding" (Biesta & Osberg, 2010, p.2). From this theoretical position, we reconceptualize continuity/discontinuity as "a complex process of emergence, always open to the unpredictable and the new" (Evans, 2015, p.32).

Methodology

Addressing the complexity of the concepts of dis/continuity, this article draws in particular on stories of children, family members, and professionals working in the field. The work presented here is from a larger research study that explored multiple forms of dis/continuity by the first two authors of this article. We interviewed early childhood practitioners and parents from across the country. For three years we attended local, state, national, and international conferences and presented sessions on continuity, during which we invited participants to share stories with us. When we requested stories about continuity and/or discontinuity, the participants often asked what the terms meant, but we resisted defining them, to hear what the terms meant to each individual. Every story added a dimension to our understanding of the concepts.

We also spoke one-on-one and in small groups with parents, extended family members, teachers, administrators, home visitors, developmental specialists, university professors, students, and others. Over 100 stories came from programs in affluent areas, in places where families live in poverty, in urban, suburban, and rural communities. These stories reflect the lives of families and the work of individuals associated with different programs: university lab schools, family childcare homes, Head Start programs, private programs, public schools, and community health organizations.

Responses to the request for continuity and/or discontinuity stories were written down and analyzed for common themes. The six stories selected for this article related to the US policy agenda of system building to create dis/continuity in early care and education. These stories open up space for what Dahlberg and Moss refer to as "minor politics" that "involves a constant critique and takes a reflective attitude" on mainstream politics, which are discussed throughout this article as the politics of complexity reduction that assume linear thinking, predictability and control (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p.151).

In the section below, we examine three types of continuity/discontinuity we heard from the stories and read in the literature: developmental, structural, and cultural. Although there may be other forms of continuity/discontinuity, these three types seemed most salient in the interviews with early childhood practitioners and family members that were present and absent in the formation of the current policy agendas for building early childhood systems in the US. In each, we consider how continuity/discontinuity is conceptualized, and make visible the tensions and contradictions inherent in the process.

Dis/Continuity from Three Perspectives: Developmental, Structural, and Cultural

Developmental Dis/Continuity

Developmental continuity describes the belief that child development is "sequential and hierarchical" and leads to practices that promote continuity and attempt to minimize discontinuity in an otherwise forward-moving developmental trajectory (Scully,

Seefeldt, & Barbour, 1993, p. 11). However, as seen in the story that follows, the age-specific, developmental information that a new director noticed the teachers used to create supposedly "appropriate environments" in fact brought about abrupt change, segregation, and discontinuity of caring and experience for toddlers in her program.

> ***Sent to the other side of the gate.***
>
> I worked in a program for infants and toddlers housed in one room separated into two spaces by a large baby gate. On one side was the infant room, which had children aged 6 weeks to 18 months, and on the other were the toddlers who were 18 months to 3 years. This program, like many others, believed that to ensure a developmentally appropriate environment, at 18 months children should move to the toddler room on the other side of the baby gate. When I first entered the program, I was struck by how many children, especially the toddlers who had just 'moved up,' spent large parts of the day at the baby gate crying for the teachers who had cared for them since they were tiny. And the teachers pretended they didn't see them or told them to go play. But these toddlers didn't want to play or talk or read books or sing. They used all their energy trying to understand why they were sent to the other side of the gate. (Interview with a director, 2015)

Viewing children through a predictable sequence of development and growth focuses the gaze on the pre-determined milestone or stage and fails to leave space for what the child desires or is truly capable of. Cannella writes, "Younger human beings are expected to live within our child development expectations, and they may even respond to these expectations, never revealing their real worlds, the worlds that go beyond what we have conceived" (Cannella, 2002, p. 59). The claimed universal truth of developmental norms and trajectories for all children has "strong normalizing tendency" and leads to the production of "not-ready," "abnormal," or "at risk" children in need of intervention (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007, p.102).

The construction of societal urgency and a great need to fix these problems naturalizes "surveillance, limitation, and regulation" of young children as "necessary for their own good" (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 88). Further questioning developmental continuity, dynamic systems theorists maintain that development is not a progression of individual behaviors but "arises within a context as a result of multiple developing elements" that are mutually interdependent (Thelen, 1995, p. 82). Development occurs in uneven spurts and does not always follow a forward-moving progression. In addition, inspired by the post-structural concept of "rhizome" that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) developed, some early childhood researchers argue for dynamic, flexible, and "lateral" logic in thinking about child development:

> A rhizome is never finished, it is always "becoming" through crossovers between offshoots, through expansions of one form of growth into another and through the death and decomposition of outdated elements. Thus, rhizoanalysis explains things in terms of a dynamic, every-changing "becoming", rather than a fixed and finished "being" (MacNaughton, 2005, p.90).

Children's becoming is not defined in advance but is full of tensions as "children negotiate different possibilities for themselves as gendered, racialized and classed beings" (MacNaughton, 2005, p.94). This view of development requires that teachers observe and listen to children to generate questions for critical dialogue and reflection, while making links to the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Such differences

in beliefs about the nature of development result in differing perceptions of continuity as well as discontinuities in daily practice. The developmental continuity perspective establishes consistency and stability as unquestionably desirable for all children. In contrast, complex and dynamic views on child development assert the role of both continuity and discontinuity in the lives of children.

Structural Dis/Continuity

Structural continuity is the construction of an early childhood system with interconnected institutions or events that, together, create a perceived whole. It mirrors developmental dis/continuity in that children, families, and teachers engage in a predictable sequence of education/care that is under surveillance and regulation. In the US, as in other countries, program regulations are developed and mandated in an attempt to ensure continuity. These regulations include childcare licensing, subsidy systems, quality improvement efforts, and workforce initiatives (Office of Child Care, 2011; The National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives, 2014).

Structural continuity, as used here, refers to the policies, rules, common practices, and regulations that attempt to establish supposedly smooth transitions between entities that often involve ruptures or breaks. Structural continuity occurs, hypothetically, when children move between settings that share such structural qualities as teacher-child ratio, numbers of children per class, credentialing requirements, salaries, licensing, and other regulations (Kagan & Tarrant, 2010). Educators and researchers, who believe that abrupt change or discontinuity is unhealthy for the child, have sought ways to smooth children's transitions between settings, grade levels, and systems. Some schools hope to create continuity for children from Pre-K to third grade by aligning practices across the ages and making special efforts to smooth the transition. These practices include "consistency in learning environments, program quality, coordination and integration of curriculum and teaching practices, and family support services" (Geiser, Horowitz, & Gerstein, 2013, p. 2).

People who write about early childhood systems think about the systems in different ways. Some describe an ecological early childhood system that links social, economic, and physical services (see Center for Law and Social Policy, 2011). Picture a family that is new to the United States—or another country. A comprehensive early childhood program might offer them assistance with housing, English, or other language classes for the adults, as well as access to medical and legal services. Such a system can provide families and children with a supportive experience.

Another way to conceptualize early childhood systems is as linked educational institutions that can operate separately, as in early childhood programs and elementary schools (e.g., Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). The next story tells of these two separate institutions.

> ***The bearer of bad news.***
>
> I sit in Head Start leadership meetings and we really believe in the importance of parents. We discuss expectations and the importance of communication about their child's learning. We do everything—even drive parents to doctor's appointments. But one thing that we don't do well is to prepare parents for the public schools. We prepare the kids but not their parents. I guess we don't want to be the bearer of bad news. The families leave us and go to public schools and have no idea what's going to happen. They have to be

> buzzed in the front door of the school and then interrogated by the receptionist: "Why are you here?" The public schools won't spend 20 minutes talking to the family. It's not welcoming. They don't invite conversation like Head Start. The family piece just drops off in the public schools. (Interview with a Head Start education coordinator, 2015)

This coordinator describes two school cultures that differ dramatically. Articulated and unspoken philosophies underlie each systems' practices. Preschool programs might better prepare parents and children for public schools. Public schools could also be ready to accept all children or, perhaps, programs serving children under the age of eight could be designed in ways we have not yet considered. Underlying each strategy are beliefs about children, families, and governmental responsibilities, as well as the resulting goals. These notions will determine the nature of any system.

Systems with differing goals: Two examples.

A commitment to children's well-being is one goal for building early childhood systems (Bruner, 2012). Those who subscribe to this purpose recognize that children grow, and families live and work, within an interconnected system. Through an ecological approach to system building, a well-organized and coordinated system of early childhood care and education might result in opportunities for children to move through connected community educational settings. Concomitantly, a network of linked agencies and service providers support the health and welfare of their families.

Another type and purpose of system building, as evident in the current conceptualization of early childhood policies and initiatives, is for children to become productive citizens. These early childhood initiatives, such as the US government's "Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge," aim to ensure that children enter elementary school prepared to succeed there. The central purpose of this initiative is to prepare children for academic success (Perez & Cahill, 2016). Such school readiness initiatives have targeted continuity to maximize children's later ability to be productive citizens. This "human capital" perspective constructs childhood as "adult in the making, lacking competencies of the adult that he or she will become" rather than a "young human being in his or her own right" (Uprichard, 2008, pp. 303-304). The decisions made by the US Department of Education are philosophically aligned to a human capital ideology and thus, finances preschools to prepare young children for their movement into elementary school. In short, such readiness initiatives create a system that includes early care and education in a vision for children from birth through college, often burdened with deficit notions of children (Iorio & Parnell, 2015).

The two approaches to early childhood systems have significantly different goals. The ecological approach aims to improve the overall quality of life and well-being of children and families. The readiness approach uses early childhood care and education to keep children on track for future academic success. While early educators might create structural continuity when they link programs, if they do not attend to the nature and the goal of the programs they are connecting and their philosophical stances, the dis/continuity may be undesirable and possibly do more harm than good. When creating a system itself becomes the goal, educators risk linking programs that do little to improve children and families' lives (Klein, 2012) and are unlikely to achieve desirable goals.

Cultural Dis/Continuity

Structural and developmental dis/continuity can come into conflict with continuity between home and school, often called cultural continuity. For instance, despite its

current emphasis on respect for the home and children's families, Head Start, serving low-income children and their families in the US, was initially designed as a two-generation, compensatory program that redirected the child's development by educating their parents/family members. The thought at the time was, left uninterrupted, the child's development would fall short of optimal.

A program such as Head Start would alter the developmental trajectory as families took on more teacher-like attitudes and mainstream values, and teachers provided optimal learning environments for children outside the home (Peters & Kontos, 1987). Pressure on teachers, children, and families to move children along a developmental continuum that maximized their growth potential continues today and can work against another type of continuity - continuity between home and school, specifically, cultural continuity.

Cultural dis/continuity can occur when a teacher has knowledge of a child's home, family configuration, and cultural community that facilitates the transition from home to school. In the next story, a staff development specialist described how a director of one early childhood program resisted supporting cultural continuity for one form of family diversity.

> ***An open and heated discussion.***
>
> Last week we had a meeting with the directors from our five early childhood sites and the two of us who are staff development specialists. We talked to the teachers about the upcoming Diversity Conference. It will be open to teachers and we invited directors to encourage teachers to propose workshops to present. We define diversity broadly and talked about how, although some children at our centers have gay or lesbian parents, those families are not represented (pictorially) in the classrooms. This launched a 30-minute discussion that was both open and heated. One center director in particular said, 'Why do we have to talk about it?' She defended her position with 'We don't have to put it in their faces. They already know about their families.' She saw no need for books, images, or conversations with children and felt very strongly about this.
>
> The two of us who are the staff development specialists were vocal, but the other four directors were absolutely quiet. We tried to push that director to think about why she supports other languages and represents a variety of religious observances at holiday times. She shows disabilities, although there are no children in wheelchairs at her center. Why doesn't this type of diversity count? The director answered, 'No, but I'm saying . . . the children are too young.'
>
> I've seen people argue in ways that are more clearly homophobic. This director couched her position in child development and the needs of the larger group, claiming that representation of gay- and lesbian-headed families at her center would be 'confusing to the children.' She said that if people are not in the building, it's too abstract for children. I asked her, 'But what about children who never see or hear their family represented?' She answered, 'We say everybody's different, and everybody's comfortable with their own family.' (Interview with a staff development specialist, 2015)

This staff developer expressed concern that children and parents from same-sex families need to be explicitly welcomed into the preschool setting to be members of that

school community. It is when we make differences invisible rather than welcomed that we render them "a covert, secretive process" (Sapon-Shevin, 2017, p. 40). Research indicates that same-sex parents may feel ignored, excluded, and mistreated by schools (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Families report that these feelings emerge because of subtle forms of exclusion, denial, and devaluation rather than overt displays of anti-LGBT attitudes (Adams & Persinger, 2013; Sue, 2010).

In this story, the director does not believe that preschools should acknowledge gay and lesbian families. When she refuses to make their family structures visible, she isolates those families from the school, and that isolation constitutes a discontinuity between home and school for those families—though perhaps a continuity in perspectives or beliefs and conduct for other families as well as educators. We hear the director's belief that children are too young to understand that some children have same-sex parents. She defended her position using a selective understanding of a developmental continuum. When she claimed that young children cannot comprehend LGBT families because the idea is too confusing and abstract for them, she was not giving children credit for what they can grasp. In fact, many of the children at her school know about the families with whom they interact. In particular, the children living in these families obviously know they have two moms or two dads. Thus, this story illustrates home-school dis/continuities such as the belief that children are too young to comprehend what is in the everyday of their lives and that only certain types of families warrant acknowledgment at school.

"Continuity" as Normative Policy Solutions or Fixed Goals: Efforts to Build Four Early Childhood Subsystems

Government funded initiatives in the US such as "Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge," (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) sources of philanthropic support, and advocacy efforts aim to transform early childhood education from many fragmented and unconnected entities into a coordinated system. The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council points to:

> …the essential need for consistency and continuity in early care and education both over time as children develop and across systems and services.
>
> Yet just when children would benefit most from high-quality experiences that build on each other consistently over time, the systems with which they interact are fragmented. (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015, p. 1)

In an effort to decrease fragmentation and increase structural and developmental continuity, states in the US are fashioning early care and education systems in certain ways. In this section we look at four system-building movements or subsystems. Across the US, as elsewhere, these are implemented in varying degrees and in different ways but seem to emerge from the same discourse and result in early childhood policy documents that reflect generalized thinking and the creation of rigid systems. Yet, Urban (2008) argues that these policies are "an effective means of control and regulation of diverse individual practice through dominant knowledge" (p. 143).

Early childhood professionals have proposed numerous strategies to link existing partners into a single early childhood system that can supposedly provide continuity and coherence. One such strategy is to create subsystems that can operate independently or together (Goffin, 2013; Klein, 2012). At the foundation of each of these subsystems is the assumption of a shared core body of knowledge about children.

In this section we briefly discuss four subsystems with a particular focus on: 1) quality practices promoted by QRIS, 2); required professional development for current and future teachers; 3) early learning standards developed for programs serving young children; and 4) the nature of the data collected and shared by educators and agencies. Those who design systems anticipate that successfully implementing these subsystems can positively support children's learning outcomes as they move between settings. However, our discussion presents these subsystems as "new forms of governance, surveillance, regulation, and classification" that privilege some ways of being, while excluding others, in the name of continuity that embodies sameness and singular ways (Bloch & Kim, 2012).

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

Quality rating and improvement systems set criteria for and assess early childhood settings to improve and communicate about programs (Schaack, Tarrant, Boller, & Tout, 2012). Advocates believe that implementing a QRIS could improve the quality of early childhood settings and support early learning outcomes for children. As suggested by Duhn and Grieshaber, the current treatise is that "everyone… wants high quality programs and the best early childhood education for young children" (2016, p. 54).

QRIS assesses staff qualifications or their education background, policies, practices, the learning environment, and the "developmental appropriateness" of the curriculum (NAEYC 2009). Proponents of establishing structural continuity through QRIS believe they encourage centers to improve their quality. QRIS prescribe so-called high-quality practices to support developmental continuity that early childhood programs can emulate and, in some states, motivate early childhood centers with financial incentives to aim for that quality. In the process of quantifying the quality of environments for children, we, the authors, believe the complexity of building relationships and its influence on learning is lost.

Beyond making complexity invisible, QRIS raises the question of what quality early childhood education is and who decides. National organizations and the states themselves link higher QRIS ratings to their articulated ideas about quality. The ensuing standards, for example, those that encourage ongoing communication and understanding between home and school, may encourage practices that create cultural continuity within the program. However, culture itself is complex and cannot be reduced to these predictable and simplistic elements. Therefore, one definition of quality, even aiming at cultural continuity for one group, may not serve the purposes of all children, families, and teachers, thus simultaneously generating discontinuity for others.

The notion of quality itself, and related constructs such as efficiency, accountability and evidence-based practice have come under question for over twenty years (Cannella, Perez, & Lee, 2016). It has been challenged for its ties to universality and technicality as applied to the business of care (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). Here we suggest that the QRIS system, as used in most contexts in the US, and its many expectations/regulations, uses the language of "quality" to undermine professional autonomy, which we address next.

Professional Development and Degrees

Teacher education and training programs for pre- and in-service educators along with career lattices and degree attainment standards have become part of the work of building an early childhood system. The next story, told by a principal, illustrates how a

select form of formal education is valued over local knowledge and personal experience in the community.

The parent coordinator.

> Marisol was one of those active parents. She was the parent of three children in public schools in the community. She had come up from the Dominican Republic and was quite well educated there, but her credentials were not valid in the United States.
>
> We saw Marisol's natural leadership qualities and hired her to work in the school as the parent coordinator. At that time, public schools did not have parent coordinators; we invented the role. We established a physical place where parents can gather when they come to school. There's always coffee brewing, comfortable chairs, resources for getting jobs and finding housing, and workshops on being supportive of children's education and well-being. The parent coordinator's job is to reach out to families, help them feel welcomed in school and assess their needs and strengths to keep the program relevant. The parent coordinator literally coordinates activities for parents and other family members. We have a lot of active grandparents, and the parent coordinator reaches out to whomever a child's caregivers are. She helps them to feel comfortable and helps them with issues related to the children's education, their own education, and the family's well-being.
>
> Twenty-three years later, Marisol is still the parent coordinator. She knows everybody in the community. She has—by being who she is—put herself through college. Although she already had a bachelor's degree from the Dominican Republic, when she saw it would not be accepted in the US, she went back to school, got a second bachelor's and subsequently, a master's degree. She has inspired so many other parents to go back to school and get a degree. (Interview with a director of a community childcare center, 2013)

Standards for professional development aim to establish professional continuity by ensuring that each early childhood professional has core knowledge about young children's development and the best practices to promote development. In the US, one non-profit but large national organization, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (hereafter referred to as NAEYC) has announced the "Power to the Profession" movement (NAEYC, 2016) which will set forth a "unifying framework of professional guidelines for early childhood educators – from required competencies and qualifications to career pathways and compensation" (http://www.naeyc.org/profession/overview). Despite conflicting research findings on the impact of a teacher's credential or degree on children's learning, professional literature, teacher education programs, and professional organizations continue to promote degree attainment for early childhood teachers (Barnett, 2011; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). In addition to lingering questions about the efficacy of mandates for professional credentials, others question how professionalization discourse excludes some individuals from early childhood, resulting negatively on the workforce and children it educates (Campbell-Barr, 2018). This type of exclusion was evident with Marisol's education credentials from the Dominican Republic.

This story points to the value of family and community's funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and the importance of linguistic and cultural

connections which are under-emphasized in the literature and discussions on professional teacher standards. As early childhood systems emerge, the professionals who work in those systems will do their jobs best with a deep understanding of themselves and the children and families with whom they work.

Early Learning Standards

Efforts to build structural continuity within an early childhood system reaches beyond the overall quality of the early childhood programs and teachers' qualifications and include what we should expect from children's learning and how well they are meeting those expectations. The next story describes a lack of consensus about children's capabilities. It highlights the perceived need for agreement about what children know and can do—a lacuna that early learning standards aim to fill.

> ***Moving downward on the child.***
>
> Currently, I am working with 4-year-olds and the expectations that the program is targeting (earning letters and basic math skills) do not match the children's personalities or needs. I see children are in need of developing social and emotional skills—not through contracts, threats, or sitting isolated. Children need warm relationships and people (teachers) who actually love the idea of spending long hours with them and have the intention throughout the day to make a full rich experience for them. I believe love, fun, and learning should be the base of early childhood. We should plan learning that moves from the child (as an individual, knowing his or her needs) upward into the curriculum. What I see is that the schools move downward on the child with their curriculum. (Interview with a preschool teacher, 2014)

This educator chafes under her program expectations about when children should acquire certain knowledge and skills, how teachers should support children's growth, and the teacher's consequential role in the classroom. In response to this confusion, states and agencies have established early learning standards that outline what abilities, skills, and knowledge teachers can expect from children at different ages. Learning standards describe the "normal" child or one that fits the norms of developmental psychology. Such documents draw attention from an understanding of children through a multiplicity of perspectives and the effects that our understandings of childhood have on the lives of children and families (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008). If early learning standards do not reflect children's diverse ways of learning and being, the standards create a mismatch between what teachers do and who the children are.

Despite the problematic nature of QRIS, professional development systems, and early learning standards, agencies are being held accountable for the funding they receive based on how well they improve the quality of early education and children's learning. These improvements are measured through the accompanying data systems.

Data Collected and Shared

Early childhood teachers collect data in a variety of ways and for different reasons. As you will read in the next story, educators' use of data varies too. For example, in the US kindergarten teachers must perform multiple standardized assessments of children's academic abilities as a baseline to document progress, which is most often disconnected from children's preschool assessment. The two measures mentioned in the next story, "Discover and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills" (DIBELS)

(Hoffman, Jenkins, & Dunlap, 2009), are measures used to regularly monitor children's early literacy, early reading skills and math.

Assessment in Pre-K and kindergarten.

> I've been a kindergarten teacher for many years, and this is my first year with Pre-K. In Pre-K, we use rubrics, and you see a lot of gathering of observational data. I use a lot of authentic gathering of documentation, portfolio installments, and observations. The fear is that when children leave Pre-K and go to kindergarten, what happens to all this great documentation? The systems for evaluation change to a more testing-like environment, for example, the DIBELS and Discover. (Interview with a preschool teacher, 2014).

The coordinated collection and use of data constitute another subsystem in addition to QRIS currently in use in the US, and in some other countries as well. Accountability discourses have established the need to use data to show exactly *how* high quality an early childhood program is, or how much learning a child has gained in a year. In doing so, highly complex contexts are reduced to a quantitative evaluation that fails to reflect the intricacies and variability of teaching, learning, and forming supportive relationships (Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016).

Beyond data providing accurate and reliable results, a significant obstacle for proponents of early childhood systems is that the data that is useful for evaluating programs and schools is presented as being helpful to teachers. And teachers are usually the conduit for collecting the data, often leading to the practice of "teaching to the data collection" (Kim, 2016, p. 98). But, in order to be truly meaningful to teachers, data collection should provide useful information for teaching.

Conclusions

Governmental and nongovernmental agencies hold oversight and wield power as each agency has a mission that drives decisions about where to put energy and funding—decisions that affect children, families, and teachers at the local level. The presence or absence of funding and from where funding and regulations emerge shape early childhood policy and practices. Early childhood in the US, as elsewhere, is "housed" in multiple national, state, and local legislative departments. Policies, professional requirements, and philosophies differ for each entity and, in the US, vary from state to state. Larger entities—the national, state, and local legislative departments that make early childhood policy, for example—differ philosophically as well. Each has jurisdiction over early learning standards, definitions of quality, professional development and training, and data collection. What they ask of programs may differ, creating conflicts when early childhood programs are accountable to more than one of these entities.

This article has addressed system planning at the conceptual and policy level, and system implementation at the local level. System-building occurs at the macro level through policies and procedures. Teachers enact those policies and procedures on the micro level through daily interactions with children, families, and other early childhood professionals who work with them. Policymakers can plan for dis/continuity at the system or macro levels, but policy intentions are often quite different from the everyday outcomes that result.

The system-building work at the macro level then can inhibit dis/continuity at the micro level where individual children, teachers, and families connect one experience to the next. The challenge may be to develop systems in which the key players remain

decision makers and can tailor their teaching to the children and families with whom they work. Otherwise, we can fall prey to a false dis/continuity that embodies sameness and singular ways. Standardization, instead, inhibits the connections that continuity—as well as discontinuity—can provide.

Our task, then, if we build a system, is to create one at the local or community level that does not seek sameness in the name of continuity. Uniformity or standardization mandated at the macro level prevents interaction, adaptation, and authentic relationships at the micro level. Dis/continuities are ultimately contingent on the interactions between individuals and their environment. This means that individuals—children, their families, and their teachers—have some role, some agency—the ability to act, as well as resist. They are the ones in relationship with one another in the sociocultural contexts of the past and present. Positioning continuity and discontinuity in opposition to one another creates a false binary that fails to give sufficient recognition to the importance of both and the relationship between people, organizations and policies.

The aim, perhaps, is for communities and agencies to use their local knowledge and create flexible systems within their own context. This provides for communities to be the source of meaning in the development of early care and education. Systems and structures that focus on children and can change and grow to fit children in diverse communities can support connections within programs. All three types of dis/continuity currently used in the literature: developmental, structural, and cultural need to be unpacked and reconsidered. How might cultural continuity take center stage in the dis/continuity discussion? Might developmental and structural continuity discourses be obscured and reconceptualized toward a locally defined system or, perhaps, lead to a collective creation of supports for teachers, children and families?

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