Testifying before the National Education Goals Panel some years ago, a kindergarten teacher dramatically impressed and moved the assembled group of governors and legislators with her words: “I am a kindergarten teacher and I have the best job in the whole world. My kids and I love each other.” She went on to tell how she scavenged junk from neighborhood vendors for the children’s science and art projects because supplies at her inner-city school were lacking. Even more poignantly, she noted very real tensions: “I am pressured to be everything to everyone; I am caught between developmental and disciplinary approaches to pedagogy and curriculum; and I am tossed about between play and formal instruction.” She closed her comments with a simple question: “How am I supposed to keep the hopes of my families and children alive when my own dreams for the possibilities of kindergarten are so diminished?”

Like this caring kindergarten teacher more than a decade ago, we are all desirous of reconciling the pressures on kindergarten today with our knowledge of child development and early childhood pedagogy. We are all eager to make the kindergarten experience as rich and as contributory to young children’s development as possible. We want this even as we recognize that, for many, kindergarten remains the overlooked year, overshadowed by the policy fanfare of prekindergarten and the domination of standards, testing, and the regularities of school. Stated differently, we all are desirous of retaining the uniqueness of kindergarten culture against a society demanding academic assimilation.

How do concerned educators and policy makers buck the tide, or at least reconcile it with the needs of today’s young children? What is worth holding onto from kindergarten’s past? How do we align the social constructions of children from that past with the genuine need to consider the deep-seated and historically underaddressed issues of inequity of access and inequality of service? How do we create environments for children that are culturally sensitive, are respectful of current realities, and transcend the vagaries of the kindergarten debate?

Simply said: What is it we want kindergarten to be and do? And how do we achieve it? These questions frame this chapter.

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Perspectives on what kindergarten should be and do

To address these questions, we turn first to those who are invested in kindergarten:

The child—I’m 5 years old, and I want to feel welcome in my kindergarten. I want to be in a space where I feel respected and honored, no matter what my background or learning ability is. I want there to be nice children in my class who will become my friends.

I want a teacher who will be patient with me when I make mistakes, who will challenge me to be better than I am, and who will notice my special strengths, needs, and progress. That’s not too much to ask for, is it?

The parent—I’m the parent of three children, and I see big changes in kindergarten from when my first child attended and now that my “baby” is here. I want to understand the reasons for all these changes. Sure, I want my child to learn and be ready for first grade. But I’m not sure how children this age really learn best.

I want a kindergarten where I will be welcome, and where I can learn, too. I want a kindergarten that will help make my child the best she can be. Mostly, I want kindergarten to be a place where my child feels—and is—safe and engaged in learning.

The teacher—I’ve been teaching for 20 years, so I’ve seen kindergarten curricula and fads come and go. I’ve lived through talking toys, computer wars, science kits, and math tools.

I want the public and policy makers to recognize the legitimacy of play as a means for young children to learn and to achieve standards. I want curiosity, motivation, creativity, socialization, and task persistence recognized not merely as legitimate but as the primary goals of kindergarten.

I want the freedom to create my own classroom dynamic and to be as unfettered as possible by extraneous paperwork and requirements. Finally, I want and need to work in an environment where my knowledge and credentials as an early childhood educator are recognized and respected.

The principal—I’m the principal of a K–6 school in an urban setting, and I want good teachers who understand the importance of kindergarten.

I want teachers who see parents and the community as rightful partners in children’s education. I want a per diem funding allocation that treats kindergartners as full-fledged members of the school community and funds them on an equivalent basis to older children. I want full-day kindergartens, because the data are clear that full-day services not only promote children’s performance but also ease the burden on teachers. I want kindergarten standards, curriculum, and assessments that are appropriate and aligned with those of preschool and first grade.

I want to create a learning community in my school where teachers have the opportunity and desire to grow and to lead.

The policy maker—I’m a state legislator, and I’m concerned about the growing achievement gaps among children in my state. I want kindergarten to be an indispensable means for improving achievement and preparing all children to be engaged citizens. I want our state to recognize and support kindergarten as a fully integrated part of the education system. I want every district in the state to ensure that every child—regardless of language, culture, or ability—has the opportunity to attend kindergarten.

I want the state to provide adequate funds for kindergarten; I don’t want to hear from my constituents how kindergarten teachers are buying their own classroom supplies or how parents are being charged fees for their child to attend a full-day kindergarten program.

Sharon L. Kagan and Kristie Kauerz
Guiding principles for what kindergarten should be and do in the future

Drawing from the work of many scholars and practitioners, we offer the following guidelines:

Kindergarten must remain “special.” Kindergarten is the repository for the hopes and dreams of children, parents, teachers, principals, and policy makers. As children are not miniature adults, kindergarten is not miniature school. For children (and their parents), it is the transition year when they feel they are entering the formal “school” system. For teachers, it is the time when they know children’s critical learning patterns begin to be established. For principals and policy makers, it is a time they want to be fully integrated with, yet distinct from, the complete educational continuum. In the future, kindergarten must continue to be regarded as special.

Kindergarten must still keep the child front and center, even with the new emphasis on content. As the world globalizes, and pressures for performance and performance-accounting mount, the kindergarten curriculum must evolve. But it must never sacrifice the child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and learning development. Kindergarten must prioritize the teaching and nurturing of children, not the teaching of content. Kindergarten must promote children’s enthusiasm, initiative, and engagement in learning. This is not to diminish the importance of cognitive development, but instead to suggest that children’s social and emotional well-being and eagerness to learn are prerequisites for their absorbing formally taught content.

Kindergarten must acknowledge and support differences in the needs of children and their families. One-size-fits-all does not work in education. Children have different learning needs and styles, and kindergarten must support and encourage all children. Similarly, parents have different needs, and the structure of kindergarten (full-day/half-day or public/private) must be sufficiently flexible to meet their needs, as well.

Kindergarten must foster relationships. For young children, relationships form the sturdy foundation they need as they embark on their journey into formal schooling and the public’s high expectations for achievement and life success. Kindergarten provides a critical window of time during which positive relationships—between children and their teachers, between families and schools, and between schools and communities—can form and be made permanent. Kindergarten is an ideal time to build patterns of trust and communication to last lifetimes.

Changes in policy today for the kindergarten we need tomorrow

Policy must play a central role in order to fulfill the expectations of what kindergarten should be and do and to honor the guiding principles outlined above. Policy—at the federal, state, district, and school levels—helps ensure that desirable practices and behaviors are the norm rather than the exception.

At the most fundamental level, policy makers can ensure that kindergarten is universally available and accessible to all students regardless of their family’s income level, geographic location, language, culture, or ability. However, most states do not currently require children to attend kindergarten; seven states currently do not even require their school districts to offer kindergarten (Kauerz 2005). (For more data, see the box in the Graue chapter in this volume.) Of those states that do require their school districts to offer kindergarten, only nine currently require a full-day option. In states that do not require or financially support full-day programs, school districts that do offer such programs are often forced to charge tuition or restrict access to limited populations of children (such as low-income families). Full-day kindergarten programs should be available—and affordable—to all children.

“I’m the parent of three children, and I see big changes in kindergarten from when my first child attended.”

Kindergarten Trends and Policy Issues
measuring achievement and school readiness, which has grown since the standards movement began in the late 1980s and intensified with the No Child Left Behind Act, puts kindergarten in a quality bind. On one hand, kindergarten is increasingly looked to as a critical year for preparing children to be successful learners. This has opened new policy dialogues and opportunities. But on the other hand, the pressure of high-stakes testing of third-graders in literacy and math has resulted in policy dialogues that are often narrow and academically limited. Stories of the academization of kindergarten abound. Many states have developed or are developing early learning standards for kindergarten, most often limited to literacy, mathematics, and other cognitive areas (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow 2003). Such kindergarten standards are too narrow and do not embrace the full range of young children’s developmental needs. Wanting to ensure students’ “success” in kindergarten, many policy makers look to the children themselves rather than consider changes to kindergarten programs. For example, under the assumption that just because children are older they are somehow more likely to succeed, many policy makers tinker with the kindergarten entrance age. Some policies allow parents to hold their children back one year before starting them in kindergarten, a practice known as “redshirting.” In fact, 14 states have raised their kindergarten entrance age since 1984, trying to ensure that more children will be at least 5 years old when they enter. In reality, no matter when the cutoff date is set, kindergarten classrooms will always include children whose ages vary by as much as 12 months or more. Classrooms will always include children who are “well prepared” and not so well prepared to succeed.

Rather than trying to change the characteristics of children who enter kindergarten, policy makers should focus their time and energy on supporting schools and teachers to be prepared to nurture and support the learning and development of all the children in their kindergarten classrooms. Effectively targeting policy to improve kindergarten requires addressing pedagogy and curriculum, the preparedness of teachers, the
involve the involvement of families, and linkages to commun-unity services. The remaining sections of this chapter look at these areas to envision how policy could create the kindergarten we all desire for the future.

Policies related to kindergarten pedagogy and curriculum

In the field of education, pedagogy and content have historically been considered two distinct domains, with pedagogy consisting of how one teaches (the art and science of teaching) and content consisting of what is taught and learned (the substance or essential meaning). This division, more true as learners proceed from elementary to secondary to postsecondary education, has long been at the heart of the early childhood debate. To a greater extent than subsequent grades, early childhood education merges pedagogy and content in practice, though recognizing the distinction between them. How young children are taught is difficult to separate from what they are taught. Indeed, this link between the what and the how of early education (often characterized as “two sides of the same coin”) has long fueled internal debates about the need for more attention to the content of early childhood curriculum (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2000; Spodek & Saracho 2002).

While we acknowledge these historical debates and the reality that the pedagogy/content separation may be less pronounced in early childhood education, we have divided the discussion in two for the purposes of this chapter.

The content of the curriculum

Though intertwined, the recommended content of kindergarten can be seen to comprise six distinct domains. They are development and learning in these areas: cognitive, social and emotional, physical, language, creative expression, and the disciplines of mathematics, science, and social studies, as reflected in the excellent chapters in this volume by Golbeck, Bronson, Sanders, Strickland, Jalongo and Isenberg, Sarama and Clements, Chalufour and Worth, and Mindes, re-

Full-day kindergarten funding

Like funding for grades 1–12, state funding for full-day kindergarten is established in policy as part of each state’s K–12 education funding formula. An explicit incentive for districts to offer full-day kindergarten exists when the state provides more funding for full-day programs than for half-day kindergarten programs and this amount is equal to or greater than the amount of state funds provided for first grade.

When there is no difference between the funding for half-day versus full-day kindergarten, but the amount is greater than that provided for first grade, there is a kindergarten incentive, but not an explicit full-day incentive. States create a disincentive for districts to offer full-day kindergarten when there is no difference in the funding amount for half-day versus full-day and the funding level is lower than that provided for first grade. As of 2006:

• Seven states provide an explicit incentive to offer full-day kindergarten.
• Twenty-one states provide funding incentives for districts to offer kindergarten, but no explicit incentive for full-day.
• Nineteen states provide a disincentive to districts to offer full-day kindergarten.

—K.K.

Source: Education Commission of the States (www.ecs.org/ kindergarten).

spectively. In the past, as in the future, all these domains are required to address the full content of early education. No one domain can serve as proxy for all; each is necessary.

Certainly the future will demand knowledge of all these domains. In addition, as the world becomes smaller and its citizens more global, the content of the kindergarten curriculum needs to become more robust, by including more domains such as approaches toward learning that foster creativity, task persistence, and motivation. Children increasingly engage new realms of learning: most communities are becoming more diverse,
requiring greater resilience, understanding, and critical thinking from their members. Unlike children of even 10 years ago, for example, today’s children grow up in a digital age that brings with it an abundance of information, new spaces for learning, and unprecedented contact with people and ideas from around the world. Any vision of the kindergarten of the future must include a focus on technological literacy—the ability to use with agility all forms of technology. Some early childhood educators are reluctant to incorporate computers into their classrooms; however, while recognizing that computers can be used inappropriately, appropriately incorporating computer skills into the repertoires of young children is essential.

Kindergartens of the future should adopt bilingualism as the norm. Debate about the appropriate language of instruction for English-language learners has gone on for decades. However, with only greater globalization in our future, clearly all kindergarten children should be exposed to and taught a second language, including native English speakers. The ability to communicate in both English and another language increases children’s perspectives and experiences of linguistic and cultural diversity and prepares them for participation in the international community.

Finally, kindergartens of the future need to attend to children’s physical and mental health. The domain of social-emotional development and learning is closely aligned with mental health, and the domain of physical development and learning is aligned with physical health. But the kindergarten curriculum is often inexplicit about the importance of self health-care. As America ages, as childhood obesity increases, and as health-care costs soar, the importance of teaching young children healthy skills and a commitment to healthy lifestyles calls for their systematic incorporation into curriculum.

Where content and pedagogy meet

Characterizing pedagogy and content as “two sides of the same coin” implies that something binds them together. What is this binding force, and how binding is it? Looking at the second question first, a review of the literature suggests that the rhetoric of linkage far outstrips its reality. Early childhood education offers durable documents from the field that address pedagogy but give limited attention to content/curriculum, and vice versa. Moreover, when we train teachers, the courses we offer in the content areas (such as the teaching of reading or mathematics) are often quite separate from the courses in pedagogy (such as observing and assessing children or organizing the early childhood classroom). In short, linkages between content and pedagogy need strengthening.

To truly act as two sides of the same coin, content and pedagogy need a common adhesive. For that glue, early childhood education today may well look to the development of early learning standards—specifications of what young children should know and be able to do. Well-developed and well-used early learning standards can be the basis of what and how teachers teach. So as not to encourage the over-academization of kindergarten, the standards should reflect all domains of young children’s learning, not just the cognitive or subject-matter knowledge that children will encounter in first grade and beyond. Standards should include young children’s physical development, social-emotional development, and their approaches to learning.

Clearly, standards—as specifications of our expectations for students’ learning—should guide the development of the content/curriculum. If standards are not the backbone of curriculum, then our curriculum is teaching children what we deem less important or unimportant for them to learn. In addition, early learning standards should become the basis for our child assessments—that is, there should be direct links among what is expected (standards), what is taught (curriculum), and what is measured (assessment). Misalignment deprives children of an integrated approach to
learning and falsifies the learning process. That standards, curriculum, and assessment should be aligned not only within each grade but also from grade to grade (such as from prekindergarten to kindergarten, and from kindergarten to first grade) is self-evident.

But how does pedagogy fit into this picture? In resolving that, early childhood educators are involved in nothing less than a conceptual conversion. Traditional early childhood pedagogy is interactive, with curriculum building on children’s interests, not in a prescribed way but spontaneously. But the school standards movement is pressuring kindergarten to follow along with what’s happening elsewhere—notably, to base instruction on adult-prescribed learning goals or standards that frame the curriculum, which in turn frames child assessment. Increasingly in schools, more sequenced planning and learning is the norm. With the starting point for curriculum shifting from the child to the adult, and with pedagogy more planned than spontaneous, how does kindergarten retain its special commitment to the child? How does it honor what we know about child development?

To have specified standards, curriculum, and assessment—even to have standards-driven instruction—does not mean that pedagogy must be didactic and structured or that pedagogy cannot be child-driven. Instead, it means that teachers must understand why they are teaching what they are teaching (what learning goals will be met by the daily activities they plan). In this way, their teaching will become more intentional, with student learning outcomes in mind. Kindergarten teachers must have clear goals, a repertoire of activities to meet those goals, and the ingenuity and flexibility to create learning experiences that maximize and blend those goals and activities.

In the future, kindergarten content and pedagogy must become even more blended, more intentional, and more child-inviting. But this will take talent, training, time, an investment of resources in those who teach kindergarten, and a commitment from policy makers to validate and support developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten classrooms.

Policies related to kindergarten teachers

As parents and policy makers increasingly recognize the importance of the early learning years, they turn to kindergarten teachers not just for hope but to deliver child progress. It remains a challenge for early educators to meet these expectations without compromising their knowledge of child development. In a magnificent description of early childhood pedagogy in this volume, Heroman and Copple specify the talents and skills required of teachers, including the need to know children culturally, to be sensitive to cultural diversity, and to regard diversity as a strength. Beyond this, teachers must know child development, curriculum content, classroom and environmental management, diverse approaches to teaching and guidance, and pedagogy.

To meet the increasing demands being placed on kindergarten teachers, some of which contradict their professional beliefs and goals, it would seem clear that the first order of business is to review all kindergarten teacher-preparation programs. We must be certain they are not stuck in outdated, last-century theories and approaches. A curriculum scan should uncover the degree to which the programs include multicultural, technological, and global components. Further, it should ensure the preparation of capable pedagogical diagnosticians who fully understand and can use standards and assessments appropriately. In Gullo’s elegant chapter and elsewhere in this volume, we see how critical the art and science of assessment is—both in gathering accurate information and in using that data to inform and revamp instructional practice.

Such preprofessional development is only the beginning. It must be supported by ongoing in-service support. Many programs of new-teacher support and mentoring by seasoned teachers are being launched throughout the nation; priority should go to supporting those teachers who are new to teaching at the kindergarten level, irrespective of their experience in other grades. Coaching and peer support must also be added to the regular repertoire of in-service professional develop-
ment. Indeed, conventional in-service training needs to be rethought to embrace both hands and heads—that is, it should focus on the practical combined with the theoretical, especially as new ideas, strategies, and technologies emerge. In-service efforts that help teachers to better understand the nature of standards, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in the learning years prior and subsequent to kindergarten are also essential.

**Policies related to families and communities**

As Downer, Driscoll, and Pianta describe in this volume, it is critical to recognize that kindergarten children are interconnected and interdependent with their family, their school, their peers, and the community. To have healthy, enthusiastic, and engaged kindergartners, we need healthy, enthusiastic, and engaged families, schools, and peers, as well as communities geared toward supporting young children. As our third guiding principle in this chapter makes clear, kindergarten must foster relationships. It is the prime time in young children’s lives to lay strong foundations for trusting, mutual relationships among their families, schools, and communities.

**Supporting families**

Families form the bedrock for children’s learning and development. As Berk and Bronson richly describe in their chapters, secure family relationships are central to the young child’s social and emotional development. The ability of families to nurture their children physically, emotionally, and intellectually increases the likelihood that those children will grow up to be healthy, loving, productive, responsible, creative, and self-confident. And yet, it is rarely recognized that entering kindergarten brings profound changes and new stresses. Indeed, kindergarten is not just an important transition year for young children, it is also a major transition year for their families. As Powell and Gerde point out in this volume, kindergarten presents unique opportunities to provide special attention and benefits to families.

To support all families, and to realize the kind of kindergartens we want for the future, policy makers must embrace old-fashioned ways of thinking about what it takes to support young children’s learning and development. For centuries and across cultures, families have helped one another cope with day-to-day living. But the families of today’s kindergartners are increasingly diverse (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken 2000) and live in a high-tech, fast-paced world that exacerbates isolation, mobility, and stress.

To enable and empower families to support one another and, therefore, to support their young children, policy makers must commit to programs and services that connect families to one another; that affirm and strengthen families’ ethnic, racial, and linguistic identities; and that are flexible and responsive to families’ ever-changing needs. Furthermore, policy makers must champion the importance of strong home learning environments. A family is a child’s most important teacher, and the kinds of learning experiences that children have at home greatly impact their approach to learning in school and in life. Flexible work schedules, timely and appropriate information on child development, and parent-education programs can all enhance home and family learning environments.

**Strengthening relationships between families and schools**

During the kindergarten year, family routines change as children’s schedules, peers, and exposure to the world change. In the chapters on families and transition in this volume, the authors note that studies show that once children enter kindergarten, contact between their families and their teachers declines and shifts from being primarily home-initiated to school-initiated. This contact is increasingly negative (focusing on problems) as children advance through the grades. The relationships that are formed between families and schools in kindergarten often set the tone and intensity for such relationships throughout a child’s educational path.

Traditionally, transition practices have helped both children and families understand, anticipate, and thrive during the changes inherent in the
move from the child-centered world of early care and education into the more formal world of kindergarten and early elementary school. “Transition” is the buzzword for efforts bridging children’s home and school experiences, and has traditionally been defined as one-time, short-term activities or practices that facilitate children’s movement from one level of learning to another. But to build the kindergartens of the future, we must move away from transition as discrete events and toward the establishment of family-school partnerships. Schools should provide family outreach workers whose sole responsibility is to engage families in their children’s learning environment at school. Schools should design transition activities to meet the needs of working families by offering meeting times and events that acknowledge the variety of schedules that families keep in order to balance work and home life.

Strengthening family-school relations also requires expanding the discussions of readiness to more fully address the concept of “Ready Schools.” Even though the National Education Goals Panel included Ready Schools as part of its groundbreaking work in the late 1990s, only recently have policy makers begun to address the question of whether schools are ready to support and nurture the learning of young children. Ready Schools include more than just providing a smooth transition from home to school; they are also committed to the success of every child and every teacher; they alter practices that are not benefiting children; they take responsibility for results; and they have strong leaders who recognize the unique learning needs of young children (Shore 1998). Fully embracing the concept of Ready Schools requires assessing, supporting, and improving not just children’s individual skills but also the interactions occurring within classrooms, schools, and communities.

**Strengthening relationships between schools and communities**

Kindergartners’ success in the classroom is inextricably linked with their health and well-being. The physical and mental health status of children is a critical contributor to their overall readiness for school. From its inception, Head Start has recognized the importance of providing comprehensive services to young children. The kindergarten of the future should be no different. Strong links to physical-, mental-, and dental-health services should become a standard experience for kindergarten children. School-based health centers, mental-health consultants, and onsite dental clinics are only the beginning of the possibilities.

Beyond expanding the scope of services that can be identified and accessed from inside the schoolhouse doors, policy makers have a key role to play in ensuring that the communities outside those doors are ready to support their young children’s learning and development. For kindergartners to become wholly exposed to the diverse people, ideas, and experiences that characterize the 21st century, they should engage in learning beyond the classroom walls. Learning can and should take place through all community-based institutions. Libraries, parks, museums, recreational facilities, civic venues, and other community assets provide invaluable opportunities for children and their families.

Whatever its precise focus, each and every chapter in this volume has sounded similar themes: the importance of kindergarten, the need to rethink current practice and thinking, and the need to be policy-cognizant. In our chapter, we have tried to take this discourse one step further by dreaming about what an ideal kindergarten of the future should be and do. Yet these are the thoughts of the authors alone. Any re-visioning of kindergarten cannot and should not be so limited.
To that end, our final suggestion is that a national forum on kindergarten be established to examine the ideas presented in this volume with the goal of developing a 10-year plan for enhancing the quality of kindergarten programs. Such a plan could then serve to guide policy and practice so that advances undertaken are keyed to a broad-based, field-constructed vision of American kindergarten.

Said differently, “You have to have a dream before you have a dream come true!” Our mission, the mission of our leaders, and the mission of this volume is to dream the dreams that thousands of kindergarten teachers lament they are beginning to lose. We all need clarity of vision sprinkled with optimism and effort to fuel the hopes and aspirations of the children and families who cross our kindergarten thresholds.

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