**Assessment Data**

Assessing child learning and development has been an important part of prekindergarten programming for at least a decade. The demands on prekindergarten teachers have only increased with more funding and new initiatives.

This change has been difficult for some early childhood professionals whose practice wisdom alone, to date, had sufficed when determining whether or not a young child is ready for the next developmental milestone. Many prekindergarten professionals, for example, might say “I just *know*” when asked how they are certain that a child is, or is not ready for kindergarten. These professionals may complete assessments, but they consider them tasks to complete as opposed to tools to support instruction. This orientation is referred to by some as ‘cynical compliance’ (Bradbury, 2014).

Reducing young child and behaviors to numbers and checkmarks on assessments can also feel dehumanizing to early childhood professionals who love children and went into their profession to help children and their families (and not collect or use data). More broadly, in some early childhood program teams there is a lack of consensus on the need for assessment, the collection of data, and the uses of data. When there are inconsistent opinions about the value of data, data quality can suffer.

**Assessment and Testing: Not a new thing**

At first glance, it may seem as though in education in particular, there has been a sudden onslaught of testing and assessment requirements and prekindergarten has not been spared. While it is true that testing and assessment has increased in recent decades with greater accountability to schools and shifting federal standards, humans have been engaging in assessment for hundreds of years.

Salkind (2017) highlights numerous points in human history where assessment, testing, and data collection have been parts of everyday life. In ancient China (2200 B.C), government job applicants had to pass tests of math, writing, horsemanship, and archery to be considered for most positions. During the 1880s both the British and American civil service systems began administering exams for job candidates, and biologists and early psychologists identified the importance of testing various subjects to understand animal and human behavior and more fully quantify measurable differences as part of the study of evolution. Wartime has also revealed the importance of basic mathematical, writing, and language skills to determine soldier readiness and ability to perform in the field. In fact, assessing an individuals’ learning, skills, or development is usually a means to understand readiness – for a job, learning the next level of complexity in a subject area, entering college, or entering kindergarten.

**Why We Assess**

There are many reasons why we rely as heavily as we do on the data gathered through systematic assessment – here are just a few.

*Support, or Make Sense of Judgement*

There are many ways to judge a young child’s learning. They can include observation, portfolio review, or engaging with parents about home behavior. These are all good sources of information. Standardized assessments can help early childhood educators understand more fully what they observe in the classroom – that is, assessments can compliment practice wisdom. Assessments can also illuminate aspects of a child’s learning that are not readily apparent through these other means. For instance, it may only be through assessment that the full learning and development status of a very introverted child can become apparent to an educator. In an examination of the use of preschool assessments that measured variation in child skill development (as opposed to dichotomous checklists) Schappe (2005) found that a strong positive correlation with student assessment results and teacher’s perceptions of child skills, indicating that assessments were valuable tools for instruction.

*Cultivate Attention to Important Skills*

By using a formal assessment protocol, early childhood professionals may give more attention to specific aspects of child learning and development than they would normally. In a 2004 study Kowalski, Douglas Brown, and Pretty-Frontczak learned that preschool teachers using a formal assessment were more likely to attend to specific skill development in their students than those who did not. And, this perception of the importance of the skills increased the length of time teachers used the instrument.

*Facilitate Equitable Treatment*

Humans make judgements all the time and sometimes our judgements are based on experiences or other factors not related to the individual person, or child at hand. Many working in the social services are familiar with *Implicit Bias* – a ubiquitous condition in which people prefer one race over another without even consciously thinking about it. This type of automatic judgement can occur in settings in which economic class, gender, or culture are apparent. Assessment can help an educator have another source of information besides personal judgement when determining a child’s learning or developmental status. If high quality and free from cultural bias, assessment can help an educator create a more accurate picture of a child’s learning.

*Ease Cognitive Load*

Early educators caring for large numbers of children have a great responsibility (and a heavy workload). If an educator had only to rely on his or her own day-to-day observational judgements of children’s learning and development, it would be a herculean task. Having a standardized assessment to support observations and other inputs on child development can help an educator have a systematic approach to their classroom(s). Further, having the same information on all students, collected in a systematic way, can help an educator make comparisons or observations about what content all children did well on, or most children did not.

*Measuring Good Work*

A skeptical educator may feel that assessment data is not needed to understand how their children or individual classroom is performing. However, most funding sources require some evidence of change, or “improved lives” as a result of an investment. When a funder is supporting the work of multiple classrooms across multiple schools or districts, it becomes essential that the program have a way to show child learning and developmental changes. To show aggregated improvements, data are needed. Most well-designed programs are doing good work. Having data can help programs show and share this good work with others and ensure ongoing support for their work.

**Quality Data**

It is one thing to collect data; it is another to collect *good* data. Early in the adoption of any new assessment or data system, the first data collected is usually of poor quality. This is due to the newness of the process and all organizations need time to adopt a new way of doing work.

Another thing that influences data quality is how staff view the data as part of their work process. In some instances, staff see data collection as disconnected to their work, just “one more thing” they have to do. When an educator sees data as unrelated to their work, they are less likely to attend to the quality of that data entry, focusing on completing what is needed to be able to go on to the next task. There are two key ways that data quality can be adversely affected in organizations.

*Reliability*

Reliable data is information that is gathered using an instrument or process that when done repeatedly under the same conditions (e.g. the same student) produces the same result. This is an important concept in observational protocols in which it is important that two educators observing the same child behavior using the same instrument would articulate the same result. Another way to think about reliability is to consider a scale: you weigh yourself using the same scale six times in succession. Each time you get on the scale you weight 145 lbs. This scale produces reliable results.

*Validity*

A valid measure is one that is measuring what it is intended to measure. There are many types of validity but for this purpose, validity is simply the notion that the measure – or sets of measures together – accurately provide information on the attribute(s) of focus. Taking the example of the scale again from above, the scale consistently tells you that you are 145 lbs. However, what if you are actually only 130 lbs. and the scale is 15 lbs. off? This means that the scale is *reliable*, but *invalid.* Many early childhood programs like to develop their own assessments. Keep in mind that valid measures typically take some time to develop with rigorous rounds of analysis.

**Talking Points for Programs**

* Assessment data in early childhood can be a beneficial compliment to professional practice wisdom about child learning.
* While assessment data is just one source of information on child learning, assessment is unlikely to go away.
* It takes time to successfully adopt and implement a new curriculum and/or assessment. Programs should avoid high stakes use of assessment data (if possible) if new to the assessment or when there are hints of lack of reliable practice and use among program staff.
* Many times re-training on an assessment instrument is necessary before implementation with fidelity is possible.
* Others?

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