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## Overview and Background Significance

- Each year, large numbers of children arrive at kindergarten without the social and/or cognitive skills that are necessary for long-term, academic success (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Duncan et al., 2007; Ellwein, Walsh, Eads, & Miller, 1991; Epstein, Schweinhart, & DeBruin-Parecki, 2004; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008; Graue, 1992; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007). The educational success of American children has been connected directly to their early educational experiences (preschool, childcare, etc.) and to how well they are prepared to attend kindergarten (Duncan et al., 2007, La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Marcon, 2002).
- School readiness has been defined in a number of ways. For some, the definition relates solely to the age of the child. For others, it refers to a child's ability to learn, their knowledge of academic topics (e.g., math, science, reading, etc.), and their ability to follow rules and get along with others (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Shonkoff & Phillips (2000) found that young children who are not ready for kindergarten often become teens who are disenchanted with school and more likely to drop out. Other researchers have found that children who are not ready for kindergarten tend to carry those delays with them throughout their educational experience (Gormley et al., 2008; Magnuson et al., 2007; Saluja et al., 2000; Snow, 2006).
- The measurement of early childhood outcomes is considered to be a cornerstone of any early childhood program accountability system (Epstein et al., 2004; Schultz & Kagan, 2006).
- Whereas assessment of school-aged children typically is used to measure academic performance and progress (Eisner, 1999) or determine eligibility for special education (NRC, 2008), early childhood assessment is intended to measure a young child's progress on five different domains: cognitive, social-emotional, physical development, communication/literacy, and approaches to learning (Daily et al., 2010).
- Researchers advocate using ongoing or "authentic" assessment to measure outcomes. Bagnato and Yeh Ho (2006) defined authentic assessment as "the systematic recording of developmental observations over time about the naturally occurring behaviors and functional competencies of young children in daily routines by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers in the child's life" (p. 29).
- Previous research on early childhood assessment has focused mainly on early educators' attitudes and beliefs about assessment and the professional development they receive (Banerjee & Luckner, 2013; Pretti-Frontczak, Kowalski, & Brown, 2002; Schappe, 2006). Akers et al. (2015c) note that there has been little research done on early childhood teachers' use of ongoing assessment or the specific skill set(s) teachers need to implement assessment with fidelity. There is a great need to know what individual teachers do regarding the implementation of early childhood authentic assessment.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to determine what skills and strategies have the greatest chance of positively impacting early childhood assessment practices. Defining the parts of an early childhood assessment system with the aim of assessing their individual importance related to implementation was imperative to this research. Data on early educators' assessment knowledge and implementation skills were gathered, with the intent to determine the parts of the early childhood assessment process that may have the greatest impact on implementation rather than looking at the assessment system as a whole.

## Research Questions

*Research Question One: What curriculum and assessment skills and strategies influence the successful implementation of assessment within an early childhood educational environment?*

*Research Question Two: What components (i.e., observation/data collection; data analysis; data interpretation; hypothesis development; modify/implement individualized instruction based on the assessment data; reporting) of the assessment cycle are perceived as having a greater likelihood of improving instruction and outcomes for young children?*

## Methodology

This study made use of a qualitative, mixed methods approach to the research. Interviews and focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate methods for this research because they both allow the researcher to gain detailed information about what may or may not be happening in the field.

Thirteen teachers were interviewed in the spring of 2016. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Twelve of the 13 teachers participated in one of three focus groups. Each focus group took approximately 80 minutes to complete.

Teachers also completed a rating scale during the focus group which asked them to rate the extent to which they use 19 different authentic assessment skills in their work.

## Participants

The participants in this study included 13, Head Start lead teachers. These lead teachers were all women, with an average age of 39.6 years (range: 27-55 years). Ten of the women identified as white, one as Asian, one as Hispanic, and one as multi-racial. Nine teachers reported having a bachelor's degree, three have an associate of arts degree, and one has a post-graduate degree. On average, the teachers have approximately 10 years of early childhood teaching experience (range: 4 to 20 years) and have worked approximately nine of those years in a Head Start program (range: 2 to 20 years). Eight of the 13 teachers have spent their careers working for Head Start and Early Head Start. Three teachers said their program was located in an urban area, nine said they work in a suburban area, and one said that she works in a rural area. All 13 lead teachers were interviewed as part of the research and 12 of the lead teachers participated in one of three focus groups.

## Analysis and Results

- The qualitative data were analyzed for themes, using NVivo.
- The major themes for identified for research question one include:
  1. Teachers' knowledge and initial perceptions of authentic assessment: "You know, going through all of our college courses, talking about authentic assessment. At the time, it was very overwhelming for me, just like, I don't know. That's all I remember is it feeling like maybe a lot to do and very overwhelming and what if I don't do it right what's going to happen."
  2. Teacher knowledge (or lack thereof) of early childhood and K-12 standards: "We've all heard of it. Do we have it memorized? No." "I think we're using it in practice but we couldn't recite them to you."
  3. The importance of high-quality, ongoing professional development: "I want to say that I've learned more with the professional development than I did in the classroom, that I did educationally. Education helps you and gave me the base knowledge to start, but I've learned and grown so much more so since then."
  4. Effective strategies for implementing curricula and authentic assessment: "So then we make up groups according to the kids' skill levels. So they're getting kind of individual for where their skills are at with each other in these small groups, and those are all scaffold so each child can succeed at them and learn more."
  5. Teachers' perceptions of the barriers that impede quality assessment practices: Time, competing priorities, and the needs for greater levels of support.
  6. Supports that teachers have and still want related to authentic assessment: Individual and team coaching; additional classroom staff to aid with data collection; and opportunities to share among colleagues within and across programs.
  7. Formal versus informal authentic assessment practices: "You know those [tool name] assessments we're doing three times a year, but those aren't the only assessments we're going to use. We're not going to wait for [tool name] data to come in at the end of the season; we're doing on the spot data observation."
- For research question two, teachers identified the following themes:
  1. Teachers reported that observation was the most important aspect of quality authentic assessment. Teachers acknowledged that they rarely, however, ask parents to assist in data collection for authentic assessment.
  2. Teacher also cited the importance of using both the formal and informal authentic assessment data to inform their instruction. Greater value was placed, by the teachers, on the informal data they gather each day compared to the data gathered for the formal assessment periods.

## Discussion

- The interviews and focus groups with early educators provided insight into what teachers perceive as the most important parts of curriculum and assessment. Specifically, teachers identified observations and use of assessment data as the most important components of authentic assessment.
- The data also suggest that teachers use assessment skills in different ways. The formal assessment skills are systematic and structured, whereas the daily, informal assessment skills are adaptive and nimble. Both styles rely heavily on the teachers' knowledge of typical and atypical child development.
- Teachers admitted that their knowledge of early childhood and K-12 standards was lacking. Greater efforts should be made to increase this knowledge, as all assessment and instruction are guided by these standards.
- Teachers identified time and competing priorities as the major barriers to conducting quality authentic assessment.
- Teachers want more opportunities to talk with their peers and share ideas about implementing the curriculum and gathering authentic assessment data.
- This information can be used to inform college coursework, professional development provided by employers, and ongoing authentic assessment coaching/mentoring and other supports for early educators.
- There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was small and all the teachers were from Head Start programs. Second, these programs all use the same curriculum and assessment tool, which leads to problems with generalizability to other early care and education environments. Third, knowledge of what constitutes high quality authentic assessment does not necessarily lead to behavioral changes in teachers.
- Future research may include collecting additional data in multiple early care and education settings to add to this grounded theory, understanding how the knowledge of standards (or lack thereof) influences instructional practices, and how best to include parents in assessment data collection.