

**Frontiers in Child Care Research**  
**Annual Meeting of the Child Care Policy Research Consortium**  
**Radisson Lord Baltimore Hotel**  
**March 8–11, 2005**

**SESSION 9**

**Assessment of School Readiness and Child Outcomes in Preschool**

*This workshop will discuss the issues states need to consider when embarking on assessments of preschool and kindergarten children, including the appropriateness of various measures and methodologies for screening children for special needs, customizing teaching to the class, evaluating programs, and determining the effectiveness of programs and policies. This workshop will survey the state-of-the-art measures and methodologies used in assessments, including the merits and limitations of common approaches to evaluation of school readiness and the impact of early care and education programs.*

Facilitator: Susan Wilson, Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS, Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut

Discussants: Kelly Maxwell, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Marsha Weinraub, Department of Psychology, Temple University

Scribe: Brenda Bean, Division of Child Development, Vermont Department for Children and Families

**Handouts:**

- Kelly Maxwell’s PowerPoint, “School Readiness Assessment”
- Marsha Weinraub’s PowerPoint, “Selecting Specific Assessment Instruments for Testing Young Children”
- “Where We Stand on Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation: NAEYC and NAECS/SDE”
- List of resources on assessment, curriculum, evaluation, and accountability

**Sue Wilson**

*Overview*

- How does the topic of assessment and school readiness fit into the larger context of “Frontiers of Child Care Research”?
- Interested in building capacity within State agencies to collect data for policy purposes.
- Interested in assessment tools for measuring outcomes for children.

- Education Goals Panel provided guidance about good uses of assessment, as has NAEYC and the National Governors Association. The National School Readiness Indicators Project has also contributed to the discussion
- More materials are available at [www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary](http://www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary)

### **Kelly Maxwell**

#### **School Readiness Assessment**

Kelly Maxwell is co-director of the National Pre-Kindergarten Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She has directed several large-scale studies of young children and has specialized in studying children in legally exempt child care. In addition to a research interest, she has policy exposure in the area of assessment: Kelly served on a task force that led North Carolina through its development of school readiness policies.

Purposes of early childhood assessments are to:

1. Improve/support children's learning
  2. Identify special needs
  3. Evaluate programs
  4. Monitor trends
  5. High-stakes accountability
1. Support learning
    - Audience: teachers
    - Methods: observation, work samples
    - Timing: ongoing
    - Closely tied to curriculum
    - Lowest levels of technical accuracy
    - Assess all children
    - "Low stakes"
  2. Identify special needs
    - Audience: parents, teachers, specialists
    - Methods: standardized, norm-referenced assessments
    - Two stages of data collection
      - Brief screening for all
      - In-depth assessment
    - Timing: periodically
    - Not tied closely to curriculum
    - Higher level of technical accuracy
  3. Evaluate programs
    - Audience: policymakers, public
    - Methods: mixture
    - "Low stakes"—consequences for *programs* (no decisions about individuals)

- Timing: beginning and end of program (usually)
  - High standards of technical accuracy
  - Assess sample of children
  - Child data just one part of evaluation
4. Monitor trends
- Audience: policymakers, public
  - Timing: snapshot, repeated every few years
  - Methods: mixture
  - High standards of technical accuracy
  - Assess sample of children
  - Accountability in the large sense
    - How well is a State doing?
5. High stakes accountability
- Audience: policymakers, public
  - Data collection, standardized assessments
  - High stakes—consequences for individuals (children, teachers)
  - Assess all children (usually)
    - “Before age 8, standardized achievement measures are not sufficiently accurate to be used for high-stakes decisions about individual children and schools.”—p. 29 of *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments*, NEGP Report
  - Accountability does not equal testing
    - For accountability, it is enough to require monitoring and an intervention plan

**Agreements** in the field about early childhood assessment:

- Paper and pencil tests do not work.
- Assessing younger children is harder than assessing older children.
- School readiness assessments should cover more than one area of development.
- We are better at measuring some things (cognitive development) than others (social development).
- Our assessment tools are very limited for children who do not speak English.

**Disagreements** in the field about early childhood assessment:

- Which type of assessment is better—naturalistic or standardized?
- Is it OK to use assessments of young children for high-stakes purposes?
- Should we use teacher-reported child assessment data to make decisions about programs and teachers?
- Can we use one assessment tool for multiple purposes?

Important to consider the **purpose** of the assessment: Assessment tool should be used for its intended purpose. Individual assessments are generally not suitable for multiple purposes.

Evaluating programs:

- Must be done with high standards of technical accuracy.
- Can be carried out with samples.
- Important to collect more information than just child outcomes to know how a program is functioning.

Resources:

- *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessment*, NGEP, Available at <http://www.negp.gov/Reports/prinrec.pdf>
- *Assessing Kindergarten Children: What School Systems Need To Know*, SERVE report, available at <http://www.serve.org/publications/rdakcg.pdf>

## **Marsha Weinraub**

### **Selecting Specific Assessment Instruments for Testing Young Children**

Marsha Weinraub is a recognized expert on personality and social development in young children. She is studying child care for infants and toddlers and its impact on their development. She also studies child care and employment of low-income families. She is Principal Investigator on the NICHD Study of Early Child Care.

Perfect assessment is:

- Well-suited to the goal at hand
- Psychometrically sound (really predictive)
- Easy and quick to administer (10 minutes or less) by a teacher or an easily trained professional
- Available in different languages
- Holistic in approach to child development
- Capable of identifying child or program strengths or weaknesses

But...the perfect assessment does not exist.

Hirsh-Pasek, K, Kochanoff, A, Newcombe, N.S., and de Villiers, J. (2005). *Using Scientific knowledge to inform preschool assessment: Making the case for empirical validity. Social Policy Report, 19, 1.*

These researchers introduce two important concepts in testing:

- Product measures vs. process measures
- Considering a test's "empirical validity"

New emphasis is on "Process-Oriented Tests" by Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, et al. Process measures should be distinguished from product measures, which measure outcomes and children's knowledge.

Product measures:

- Measure outcomes of current conditions
- Assess children's knowledge

Process oriented measures:

- Measure children's progress along a developmental course
- Measure children's process, approach
- "Empirically valid"—i.e., based on developmental research

Product-oriented measures include:

- Ability to write one's own name
- Comparison of numbers of objects
- Knowledge of particular vocabulary words
- Color and alphabet knowledge

Process-oriented measures help to guard against the least useful forms of "teaching to the test" and include:

- Ability to quickly map a word onto an object and event
- Word diversity—use of quantifiers, connectors, understanding morphology
- Ability to organize words hierarchically (e.g. a kitten is a cat, a cat is an animal)
- Ability to connect sentences in story lines
- Skills that are the gateways to reading and writing, building blocks of school readiness and success

Teaching to process measures (but not product measures) is actually good because it puts teachers more in touch with what kids know and do not know, and where they need help.

Currently available tests:

- Stage 1 tests: curriculum-consistent measures
  - Reflect the content and values of the curriculum
  - Can be observation or individually administered
  - Can be completed by parents, teachers, or professionals
  - Can be screeners or more in depth
  - Can range from 10 to 90 minutes in length
  - Examples:
    - ASQ: Ages and Stages Questionnaire
    - Battelle Developmental Inventory
    - Early Screening inventory
    - Bracken Basic Concepts Scales
    - Kaufman Survey of Early Academic and Language skills
    - DECA: Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment Program
    - SSRS: Social Skills Rating System
    - Vineland Social-Emotional Early Childhood Scales
- Stage 2 tests: specific early learning skills measures
  - Reading pre-academics
    - Get Ready to Read, Test of Early Reading ability (TERA-3)

- Language
  - Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV), Preschool Language Scale (PLS-4) (auditory subtest)
- Mathematics
  - Test of Early Mathematics Ability (TEMA-3)
- Few Stage 2 tests measure social and emotional competence
  - Denham, S. and Burton, R. (2003) *Social and emotional prevention and intervention programming for preschoolers*, New York: Kluwer-Plenum.
  - Emotional competence—expression of experiences, emotional regulation, knowledge of emotion
  - Social competence—self-regulation and impulse control, sustained positive engagement with peers
- Stage 2 recommended social and emotional assessments
  - Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP), Preschool Strands, Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment System (DECA), Battelle Developmental Inventory, Infant Toddler Social Emotional Assessment (ITSEA), Penn Interactive Preschool Play Scale
- Stage 3 tests: measures specifically designed to be administered in a disability-sensitive manner
  - Often part of a formal referral process for special education services

Social emotional assessments:

- Should be integrated with the curriculum
- Should be based on teacher observation with parent input
- Should be heavily reliant on children's everyday activities
- Should not be used for high-stakes decisions

The future of child assessment:

- A brave new world where tests can be administered faster and easier
- To children as young as preschool
- To measure relevant child outcomes for high-stakes testing

Or

- A world in which we can evaluate children in context
- Where teachers can teach to the tests in a healthy way
- Where assessment can be used to improve children's educational experiences?

Social-emotional tests should NOT be used for high-stakes decisions. Because young children's social-emotional state is largely determined by family factors more than the child care setting, using limited resources to assess children on social-emotional factors is not a good idea.

Additional information:

- *Using science to inform preschool assessment*. Report of the Temple University Forum on Preschool Assessment, January 30–31, 2003, <http://astro.temple.edu/~mweinrau/>

### **“Burning” Questions**

- How can we move policy forward using assessment data?
  - What is the cost-benefit of doing so?
  - What is the burden on teachers and children of doing so?
- Are there different answers when considering kindergarten assessments vs. preschool assessments?
- There is a tremendous push to measure children when entering kindergarten to assess the impact of earlier child care and preschool experiences, even though there may be no basis for doing that. How can we influence the policy debate?
- How can research be translated into practice? Getting the information out to both the community and to policymakers about what can/should be measured at the younger ages, and what is less helpful to measure, is a key step.

### **Open Discussion**

Testing for school-age children:

- Is there any literature indicating it has made a difference?
- Several groups and national centers are looking into this very issue. No Child Left Behind is based on a belief that testing is good for older children and schools.
- However, many argue that K-12 assessment is completely different and needs to be treated differently than testing younger children. Different issues and goals of assessment are involved in younger children—it is not what they know but how they know it.
- Testing for young children can be limited by language issues—sometimes even native English speakers test lower on language fluency than non-native speakers.

Special education assessments:

- The Department of Education’s Office of Special Education has funded an Early Childhood Outcomes Center, the goal of which is to help determine what to assess in Part B and C for young children. In part, this is a response to external pressures to show outcomes improvement. The center hopes to show that assessment can be done in a way that is really useful for program improvement and child development.

Head Start assessments:

- Outcomes are now being mandated.
- We know that linking instruction and assessment can produce positive outcomes for children.
- However, Head Start teachers are collecting the information, which may or may not be valid since it is high-stakes testing.

- Researchers are studying this via work sampling and independent observers.

Can process measures be plugged into accountability plans, with timely benchmarks?

- Yes. But since we know that quality early childhood programs improve child outcomes, why spend the effort to measure child outcomes?
- Why not spend the effort to measure the quality of the early childhood programs, including whether they monitor the process measures for the children?
- What is the wisest use of resources?

Difference between CHILD and PROGRAM outcomes:

- Child outcomes are not a good way to measure program outcomes, especially given the under-skilled workforce in child care to conduct child assessments.
- It is more important to spend effort aligning what happens in programs with the standards set for what should be happening.
- Use of established curricula helps, except that young children may not benefit from application of curricula in the same way older children do. They do not learn in the same way.
- We should educate funders that measuring child outcomes is not the best use of resources. Funders and policymakers need to know alternatives, such as what data makes sense regarding school readiness (not one number or percent for all kids in the State).
- Example from Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) which cross-referenced their early childhood learning standards against commonly-used assessment tools to help guide early care and education teachers.