The Child Assessment Evolution: Controversy and Practice Explored

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Today's Agenda

- **Introductions**
- **Child Assessment History**
- **Lessons Learned**
- **Current Research**
- **Implications for Practice**
- **Open Q&A**

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Child Assessment History:

How did we get here?

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Early Assessment: The Beginnings

- **Child Study Movement**
  - Role of developmental psychologists
  - Understanding *how* children develop
- **Early assessment tools & findings**
  - Video-taping
  - Note-taking
  - Observations
  - Early scales

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Early Research on Child Development

- **Increased data on how children grow and learn**
- **Brain development from birth through age 5**
- **Studies showing long-term benefits from high-quality ECE**
  - HighScope Perry Preschool Study
  - Abecedarian Project
  - Provide rationale for investment in ECE

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The Origins of Head Start

- **Response to emerging research**
- **Designed to "promote school readiness"**
  - Originally conceptualized as literacy and math
- **Significant investment of federal funding**
- **Government desire to measure an "ROI"**
  - Measuring spending, families served (inputs)

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Assessing for Identification

- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**
- **Goals:**
  - guarantees right to an "appropriate education" for all children with disabilities
- **Implications for testing, identification, and placement**
  - valid and reliable tests
  - standardized measures
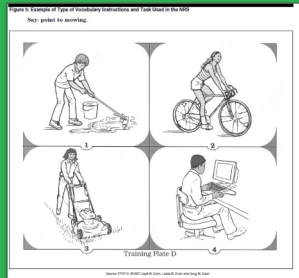 - by trained professionals
  - development of IEPs

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The Era of Standards and Accountability

- **Government Performance and Results Act of 1993**
  - Head Start requirement: conduct assessment to guide instruction
- **New requirements in 1998 Reauthorization of Head Start**
- **No Child Left Behind (2001)**
  - Goal: hold states accountable to improve education for children
  - "adequate yearly progress" based on child learning outcomes (outputs)
- **Results**
  - Development of standards
  - Alignment of instruction and assessment to standards
  - Quality Rating Systems

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Good Start, Grow Smart

- **Head Start National Reporting System (NRS)**
  - Goal: build a national database to track progress
- **Criticism**
  - Rushed development
  - Limited evidence of validity & reliability
  - Turned into a high-stakes measure
  - Narrow focus on literacy and math
  - Teaching to the test
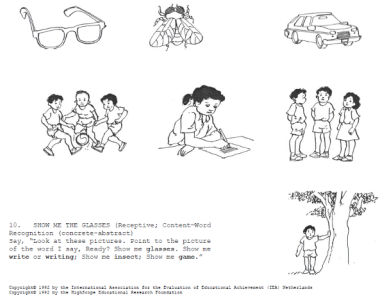- **Terminated in 2007**

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Example of Testing Situation

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Example IEA PPP Language Assessment

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Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge

- **Federal funds provided to states during the recession**
- **State-funded Pre-K programs**
  - Increase "school readiness"
  - Serve 1.3 million children
  - By 2013, 100% of states have early learning standards
  - Require child assessment

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" **Children are ready for school, families are ready to support their children's learning, and schools are ready for children.** "

(Office of Head Start, 2011)

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Implications of Policy

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Lessons Learned about Policy

- **The "stickiness" of assessment**
- **Unintended consequences of well-meaning policies**
- **Policy should be informed by:**
  - Early Childhood Research
  - The voice of EC professionals

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Controversies Unearthed About Child Assessment

- Formal v. informal assessments
- Children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Accuracy of testing young children
- Reflecting all aspects of children's development

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Current Research: What do we know about child assessment?

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" A **one-time snapshot** of a child's ability using a single instrument for all children has a risk of producing **inaccurate or incomplete** conclusions... "

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Holistic v. "Academic-based" Assessment

- **Teaching to the test**
- **Research**
  - Brain research
  - Executive functioning
  - ACEs & trauma
- **Implications for instruction and assessment**
- **Implications for state guidelines**

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Observation-based Assessments

- **Authentic environments**
- **Longer window of time**
- **Familiar adults**
- **Most valid assessment type for young children**

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Implications for Practice Today

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1. Understand your purpose

- **4 Purposes of Assessment (National Research Council)**
  - To support learning
  - For identification of special needs
  - For program evaluation
  - For accountability
- **What are your requirements?**
- **Be explicit with staff and stakeholders**

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2. Choose the "right" tool

- **Aligned with your purpose**
- **Valid and reliable**
  - Valid = measures what it intends to
  - Reliable = produces consistent results
- **Is valid and reliable for the population of children you serve**
  - Changing demographics

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3. Set your staff up for success

- **Communicate your purpose**
- **Communicate the value**
- **Training on the assessment instrument**
  - How and when to assess
  - How to score
  - Refresher trainings
  - Reliability assessments
- **Training on interpreting data accurately**
- **Training on communicating about assessments with families**

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4. Use data in the right way

- **Inform child development**
- **Inform instruction**
  - What to teach
  - How to teach
- **Inform training and PD**
  - How to best support staff

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Child Assessment is a Powerful Tool

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- Epstein, A.S., Schweinhart, L.J., DeBruin-Perecki, A., & Robin K.B. (July 2004). Preschool assessment: A guide to developing a balanced approach. *Preschool Policy Matter,* (Issue 7) pp. 1-12. Joint publication of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and the HighScope Educational Research Foundation. Available at www.nieer.org.

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