



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

Assessment and Progress Monitoring in Early Childhood

Dr. Scott McConnell
University of Minnesota



QUESTIONS FROM JUNE 25TH FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

Q: If you were a Head Start director with hundreds of children in your program, what would be on your dashboard in terms of assessment? Would you want to see averages, or subgroup analysis?

A: That's a terrific question, and a really important one. I think I'd want to make sure that I made a good decision and that I'm getting some information to monitor that decision. I would want to make sure that the measure aligns well with the things that I'm being held to account for, that it's sustainable and reasonably efficient given the resources that I have. I volunteered some years ago in a Head Start classroom here in the Twin Cities, and the teachers kept these fairly detailed written logs of kids' behavior during free play activities. I asked them what they did with them, and they said, "Well, we file them." And I thought, "Wow, that's a really expensive assessment that doesn't really help us much."

If we're going to spend time and money on assessment, we really want it to help us, I think. Assuming that measure's happening periodically, what I would want to know is whether the measure is being implemented in the way that we intend. Is it happening often enough for all of the kids, are the folks doing the measures following the procedures that we've laid out to make it happen, so that the information coming from the assessment practice is trustworthy?

Then I think I'd want to look at averages for the whole program—assuming that it's a Head Start program like the ones I'm familiar with. Here we have programs that are organized into centers that are organized into classrooms. So I might look at averages across those three levels: the whole program, different centers, and different classrooms. And I would use that information to allocate resources. Kids aren't randomly distributed across classrooms and centers, so some centers need a little bit more help. We might use that information to say, you know, "Let's get an extra speech and language person over there," or "Let's make the classrooms a little smaller over there" —some information like that.

But in addition to averages, I would also look at variation within classrooms and centers. If we just look at averages, we might miss the kids that need the help the most. Looking at the variation, how many kids are falling into those Tier-2 and Tier-3 categories, and are we reducing those numbers over time. I think those would be really important metrics for a director to watch as well.

Q: That is a fantastic answer. What are other assessments that you might suggest to monitor school readiness goals, other than those focused on literacy?

A: Well, a handful are out there already. Teaching Strategies GOLD comes to mind. Work Sampling System is another. Those are measures that I think are getting used a lot. I guess back to your original question about directors and what they would want, I would look really carefully at those particular measures and make sure that they're meeting the objectives I laid up before. I'd want to make sure they're aligned with my goals and objectives, that they're being used with fidelity, and that they're being used in a way that helps me get the information I need to assess how individual kids and groups of kids are doing in that program.

There are measures of numeracy that I'm familiar with. Robin Hojnoski at Lehigh University has been developing some early indicators of numeracy development for kids. There are other measures of literacy and language development. The CTOPP and pre-CTOPP, for instance. There are standardized measures that become a little bit more extensive. That's a list off the top of my head, but maybe you and I, Gail, can pull together a list of resources. But I think there are also reviews in the professional literature that folks could find.

Q: That's a great idea, and something that we can certainly do. To what degree can developmental and classroom assessments be attributed to intervention? How are we able to take credit for more than maturation, and how do our assessments help us understand that?

A: Boy, that is a great question. And whoever asked that question should come here and tell me what the answer is, heh. This is almost blasphemy, and I apologize—but in some ways, it doesn't matter. Because our job is to take kids and to serve them well and to help them go to kindergarten with the after-burners on, to help them be excited about learning and have all the skills that they need to benefit from what will come for them next. So, if other people get credit for it, if we get credit for it—as long as the kids are doing that, even if it's maturational, I think that's okay. In fact, I don't think it's maturational, because I think we all know that the kids that we serve are not kids that are going to get there without a little bit of help.

So how do we attribute the effects of our particular program? There are emerging ways to do this. Some—I think they're called smart designs—look at variations in program services, even within a Head Start grantee, that allow us to attribute changes or differences in intensity of intervention to changes in children's performance, and make some causal statements about the extent to which our program made that change. I think that there are probably some ways, depending on the constellation of kids that you're serving and how you serve them, to make suggestive evaluations using normative performance. So, when kids come into my program scoring below the 35th percentile and graduate from my program performing at the 50th percentile, I think that under the right conditions I can take some credit for that change.

You know, if a program is trying to include designs to evaluate program variations, then randomized control trials can be done within the context of a classroom-based or a Head Start-based program. There's a terrific book that's kind of a funny digression here, called *Poor Economics*. It's by two economists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They've done these randomized control trials in developing countries to solve very important questions, like, should we give away or sell mosquito nets that will prevent malaria? In naturally occurring conditions, they randomly assign conditions to two different villages or to two different groups of families, and look at the effects in ways that help them solve these policy-relevant questions.

So I think there are ways out there. And I think it's probably increasingly important at the program and the state level. I'm not sure that was a good answer, but that's what I've got.

Q: That was a great answer. What suggestions do you have for those working in birth to 3 who are thinking about moving their children toward school readiness?

A: The same principles as for older children apply, but, as I bet those infant and toddler servers know, the resources are not as many. There's a little bit less of a tradition of doing this kind of assessment and programming with younger kids. Colleagues of mine at the University of Kansas at Juniper Gardens Children's Project have been working with Early Head Start providers using a program called the Early Communication Indicator. If you Google "Infant IGDIs," you'll find them. My understanding is that a lot of Early Head Start providers in Kansas are using a system like this. It uses the same logic that we described before. I know some folks are focusing on more parent/child interaction and what might look like more social/emotional development for kids, although I think the two methods are very closely intertwined. There's a very similar logic there as well, about monitoring kids periodically, watching growth or change over time, and providing different approaches to intervention when kids don't appear to be making benchmark goals.

Q: What do you use to assess the quality of classrooms? For instance, when you talked about the IGDIs can you tell us what measures you were using to look at them?

A: Well, the good news for all you Head Start providers is that we use the CLASS. We also use a measure that we call Classroom CIRCLE. It's a measure that we developed. Those of you that are familiar with the CLASS will know that it describes how the classroom's doing in a general sense. The Classroom CIRCLE is more specific to the interactions among an individual child has with the materials and resources available in the classroom, and the adults, and other kids in the classroom.

So from those two measures, the CLASS and the Classroom CIRCLE, and a teacher survey in which we asked a lot of questions about qualifications and curriculum used, and things like that, we were able to look at both teacher and child activities, and more global descriptions of the classroom characteristics.

Q: Would you suggest that assessments of children be more frequent than three times a year? And how would you make that distinction?

A: I think that the rule of thumb should be assess as often as you can, as long as you're going to use the information to change interventions. So if you think that you might be able to do some minor adjustments in a classroom on a monthly basis, then a really quick monthly assessment might be very useful. I think a quarterly assessment is not bad as a global assessment—it happens often enough that we can intervene, but not so often that all we're doing is measuring kids. The last thing we want is an assessment system that takes away from kids' opportunities to develop, right? That's silly. I mean, there's that famous statement about you don't make pigs fat by weighing them, and you don't make kids smarter by testing them.

So we want kids to be doing the things that they ought to be doing, and the assessments need to be in service of that. The short answer is to test as often as you can if you'll use the information to change interventions for kids.

Q: Thinking about all of your experience in Head Start classrooms and elsewhere, can you give us an example of a program that made a great database and learning-focused decision that somehow changed the program that resulted in some great or better outcomes for children and families?

A: I can. Here in Minnesota we have the Minnesota Reading Corps, which is AmeriCorps volunteers organized through a statewide nonprofit called Minnesota Serve. They started off providing literacy tutors for elementary school, then adapted their intervention for preschool programs. They do two things in these preschool programs. They do seasonal assessments with IGDIs and identify kids that might benefit from additional intervention. These tutors are a wide variety of folks: Some are retired professionals, some are recent college graduates, some are young adults looking for a purpose and a meaningful job. These tutors run standardized interventions in classrooms for small groups and sometimes individuals. They use standardized interventions, and have refined their model over time. They figured out their idea of the best way to identify different groups of kids at different times, frequency of assessment that's best, and which interventions really seem to help, versus those that don't seem to be helping that much.

They've used the data, and they continue to use the data, I would guess—five or six years into this experience—to refine and improve the services that they're providing for kids. It's wildly successful, their outcomes are terrific—and, perhaps most importantly, both the kids and the teachers in those programs seem to love the tutors.

That is a very inspiring example to end our day on. Thank you so much, Dr. Scott McConnell. I want to thank all the listeners that joined us. We had a lot of people out there listening, which is great. We always want to thank Trevor Johnson, who puts all the IT stuff together to make this happen. We will be back here again in July. July 23rd we will listen to Dr. Dana Suskind talking about, I think, an interesting example of increasing young children's vocabulary growth by using regular progress monitoring and sharing that information with parents.



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
**Quality Teaching
and Learning**



This document was prepared under Grant #90HC0002 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning.

JULY 2012 V.1