

## NOTES TO ACCOMPANY MODULE 4: ASSESSMENT FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION

by Douglas Powell, Ph.D.  
*Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University*

---

### Using Information from Assessments to Inform Instruction

The focus of this module is assessment for the purpose of planning instruction, including individualized learning goals and experiences. This focus is different from assessment for the purpose of identifying possible special needs or assessment for the purpose of evaluating a program's effectiveness.

Assessment for the purpose of determining individualized goals and instruction is commonly associated with children with special needs and English language learners. Yet *all* children benefit from instruction that is well matched to their current level of literacy development. Teaching and assessment are complementary processes (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). Assessment makes it possible for teachers to:

- monitor and document children's progress over time;
- ensure that instruction is responsive and appropriately matched to what children are and are not able to do;
- customize instruction to meet individual children's strengths and needs;
- enable children to observe their own growth and development; and
- identify children who might benefit from more intensive levels of instruction, such as individual tutoring, or other interventions (Neuman, et al., 2000, p. 103).

On-going, regular assessment activity also provides an opportunity to strengthen collaborations with parents and primary caregivers.

### Key Principles of Assessment

#### Provide information on what child knows and does not know

As children learn to read and write, they progress along a *trajectory* that includes acquisition and coordination of knowledge and skills in a range of domains (see below). Assessment information tells us where children are on this trajectory.

Assessments should demonstrate what a child can do. Information about a child's existing knowledge and skills can be used to extend what a child already knows while also building confidence and motivation for learning to read and write (Neuman, et al., 2000).

For assessments to effectively inform instruction, there should be a constructive approach to information about areas a child has yet to master and to a child's mistakes. "Errors" provide important insight into a child's understandings. For example, a child's spelling of *candy* as *knde* can be viewed as "invented spelling" or a "spelling error" (Johnston & Rogers, 2001, p. 378).

Supports for a child's literacy learning are best designed from an accurate understanding of the upper limits of what a child knows and can do (Salinger, 2001). Moreover, children progress more readily in an environment that views mistakes as ways to learn rather than failures to be avoided (Neuman, et al., 2000).

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has important implications for assessment because it emphasizes a child's readiness to profit from instruction. For example, for one child the zone may be narrow, suggesting that the child does best when given assistance on tasks close to what he or she can handle independently. For another child, the zone may be wide, suggesting that with support he or she can perform at a substantially higher level than when working alone. Purposeful teaching within an assessment situation (called *dynamic assessment*) is key to determining a child's apparent level of development and potential level of development – that is, the performance the child is capable of attaining with support (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

### **On-going and regular, throughout the year**

For assessments to lead to learning benefits to a child, information needs to be gathered regularly so that a child's progress can be accurately determined and thoughtful decisions can be formulated about individualized goals and instruction. Initial assessments indicating what a child already knows and can do are especially helpful to teachers in determining curriculum modifications and goals for each child. See “Tips on Organizing Assessment Information” for ideas about frequency of different assessments.

### **Provide consistency in the types of information gathered**

Consistency in the types of information gathered is essential to comparing assessments across time and to revising or updating individualized goals and instruction in a particular domain. For example, comparisons of samples of a child's name-writing attempts gathered over time provide systematic information about progress as well as areas that need further work, especially if there is consistency in the condition under which the child's writing attempt is made (for example, with or without teacher assistance).

### **Use multiple sources of information**

Experts on assessment agree that important educational decisions should be based on multiple sources of information (for example, see the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). The standard is to gather high-quality information using different methods and contexts, and to not base decisions on one piece of evidence (Meisels, 2000; National Research Council, 2001).

It is tempting to search for one assessment that can quickly and efficiently serve all purposes (instruction, screening, program evaluation) (Salinger, 2001). Yet a child's progress in literacy development involves growth in many domains, and one type of observation or test is unlikely to yield the range of information needed for sound decision-making. A single assessment tool also may not provide the level of specific information needed to inform instruction. For example, Get Ready to Read! is an easy-to-use, 20-question screening tool that tells how a child is progressing toward acquisition of knowledge and skills that lead to reading and writing. While the tool is designed to help target literacy experiences to a particular child's skill and knowledge level, it is not designed to indicate specific areas to emphasize with a child (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2001, p. 31).

### **Avoid cultural bias**

Assessment procedures need to recognize that children from different cultures, linguistic groups, and backgrounds have varied experiences and styles of learning (Neuman, et al., 2000). Interpretations of a child's performance, and the communication of this information to others, need to carefully consider a

child's cultural and linguistic background. For example, full understanding of an English language learner's current point in the sequence for second-language acquisition is essential to determining appropriate assessment strategies, as described later in this section.

### **Important language and literacy domains to assess**

Important domains to assess regarding literacy and language development are described in modules 1 and 2. The domains include: print knowledge, early reading and writing, background knowledge and vocabulary, phonological awareness, motivation to read and write, letter recognition, expressive and receptive language skills, and comprehension.

## **Child Assessment Information**

### **Parent/family observations and insights**

The term "assessment" often connotes the use of standardized tests, but research findings suggest that parents can be valuable sources of information on their child's literacy skills. A longitudinal study of literacy development among low-income children found that parental reports of their child's literacy skills at three and four years of age were predictive of language and literacy performance in kindergarten and first grade (Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998).

As noted by the researchers, parental reports are based on long-term observation of a child's inclinations and aptitudes, and therefore provide information that cannot be obtained from tests and can be acquired by teachers only through extended contact with a child. Parental reports may be an especially valuable source of information at the beginning of the school year, when teachers are generally unfamiliar with children's literacy knowledge and skills. Parental reports also provide information on child behavior and motivation (for example, interest in reading and writing) in another important context (the home) that is mostly unfamiliar to the teacher.

Here are examples of the types of information parents can provide (from the Dickinson & DeTemple study):

- Does the child pretend to read alone?
- Does child pretend to read to others?
- Does child have a favorite book?
- Has child memorized any books?
- Can child recognize and name letters?
- Does child recognize any signs?
- Does child pretend to write?
- Can child write some letters?
- Can child write his/her own name?

See the section on "Communicating With Parents" for guidelines on involving parents in a literacy assessment program.

### **Child's work**

Collections of representative work by children are commonly recommended sources of assessment information (for example, see *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8*, a position statement by the National Association for the

Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, adopted November 1990; reprinted in Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992).

Illustrations of children's work include the following (Roskos & Neuman, 1994):

- Name-writing attempts
- Writing sample (such as a journal or special scribble messages such as invitations, letters, lists)
- Drawings, paintings, or other art samples
- Drawings with dictated stories
- Audiotapes of pretend storybook readings or story retelling
- Child's word box or word collection

A *literacy album* is one means of gathering information about the literacy behaviors of children ages three to five years (Roskos & Neuman, 1994). Artifacts placed in a literacy album represent real-life literacy experiences, thereby adding authenticity and improved accuracy to teachers' understandings of a young child's literacy development. Albums enable teachers to preserve early literacy attempts that can be compared to subsequent efforts. Albums also promote collaborations involving child, teachers, and parent or primary caregiver. The process of selecting items for inclusion in an album can foster important teacher-child dialogue about meanings and understandings about literacy, enabling adults to learn more about a child's literacy conceptions and children to respond to new information provided by adults.

Roskos and Neuman (1994) also suggest that a literacy album include contributions from parents and teachers; for example, parental anecdotes about home literacy activities, photographs of children reading and writing, and teacher's anecdotal records. They recommend teachers help the child establish ownership of the album – “a personal accounting of a child's earliest experiences as a reader and a writer” (p. 81) – by meeting with parents to discuss the album concept, share examples, and encourage respect of the album as the child's possession similar to other cherished items. They also recommend the album be personalized (for example, child designs the cover).

Importantly, Roskos and Neuman (1994) suggest that a selection-and-review process be established to ensure the album is a “careful presentation of a variety of literacy samples, not the accumulation of bulging, unwieldy masses of material” (p. 81). As a routine part of every day, teachers and individual children can review and select items from assorted items collected and placed into individual folders. This could be done, for example, during scheduled appointments with individual children in a quiet area during free choice time. As part of the process of children selecting special items for their album, teachers are encouraged to engage children in conversations focused on why a child thinks a selection is special. Teachers can record this comment on a Post-it note or index card (for example, “Brandon selected this birthday invitation he made last week. He likes the map best because it shows ‘where to go for the party.’ His friend James likes the map too, especially the ‘squiggly’ lines,” p. 82). See the “Communicating With Parents” section for suggestions on uses of the literacy album in teacher relations with parents.

### **Teacher anecdotal records**

Teacher anecdotal records are brief reports made by a teacher while the child is engaged in a real (not contrived) activity. The record is an objective report of a child's literacy or language behavior, including its context. Anecdotal records are most useful when connected to goals for a child and/or to aspects of the classroom environment or activities. All teaching staff should regularly contribute to anecdotal records.

Here is an example of a record: “Sammy used a novel word (“frost”) discussed during yesterday’s group time when dictating a story to the assistant teacher about his drawing made during today’s free choice time.”

Anecdotal records are useful for describing strategies a child uses to decode words, the processes a child uses while writing, a child’s uses of writing during play, and characteristics of a child’s talk during a presentation to the class or with a peer or teacher (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2002). Observations of a child’s “literacy in action” also should consider observable behaviors regarding phonemic awareness (for example, can a child “stretch” a word out to hear the sounds), letter and sound relationships (for example, can child identify rhyming words?), concepts about print (for example, does child know the difference between pictures and the words?), and comprehension (for example, can child give main idea of a story?) (Neuman, et al., 2000).

Teachers generally put anecdotal reports on easy-to-use forms such as small index cards or loose sheets of paper or computer address labels or small note pads. Clipboards are a great resource for writing on small cards or forms that are then placed in each child’s folder.

### **Performance assessments**

In addition to anecdotal records, many teachers find it valuable to gather specific information about a child’s literacy development by using an established or standardized approach to performance assessment such as the Clay’s (1985) Concepts About Print test, where a teacher asks a child to demonstrate their book awareness. In this test, for example, a child is asked to show the front of the book, to indicate where one starts reading, and where to go after reading the first page. This test has been shown to be predictive of later success in reading (Clay, 1998).

Checklists also can be used to record literacy skills such as a child’s retelling of a story or emergent writing or emergent reading. For example, Morrow’s (1988) checklist for story retelling codifies a child’s description of the story setting (for example, child begins the story with an introduction, like “Once upon a time” and number of story characters identified), theme (for example, what the main character wanted or needed), number of story episodes recalled, story ending, and sequence (whether the story is retold in correct order).

### **Norm-referenced tests**

While norm-referenced tests are typically used to evaluate a program’s impact on children’s outcomes, some tests also can be used to inform instruction. For example, the Test of Early Reading Ability 3 (Reid, Hresko, & Hammill, 2001) provides information on children’s construction of meaning (for example, knowledge of environmental print, reading comprehension), alphabet knowledge, and conventions (for example, book handling), and is normed on a national sample of more than 1,000 children ages 3 to 10 years.

Individual administration of standardized and norm-referenced tests is essential. Early childhood experts recommend that achievement tests not be used with children under 8 years of age for the purposes of making high-stakes decisions about individual children. For example, the International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children position statement on *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* submits that “group-administered, multiple choice, standardized achievement tests in reading and writing skills should not be used before third grade and preferably even before fourth grade. The young the child, the more difficult it is to obtain valid and reliable indices of his or her development and learning using one-time test administration” (IRA/NAEYC, 1998, p. 43).

### **Assessment Considerations for English language learners**

English language learners require special considerations in assessments of literacy development. Tabors (1997) emphasizes the following:

- Consider the child's ability in English, including approximate point in the following developmental sequence for second-language acquisition: home language use; nonverbal period in new language; telegraphic and formulaic language; productive use of new language;
- Recognize that any test administered in English is primarily a language or literacy test;
- Determine how child is doing with first language development (home visit is a useful approach);
- Consider contextual supports for English language learning (for example, the family's emphasis on learning English; extent of exposure to English prior to and during Even Start program participation; personality, cognitive, social skills, and relative age that may facilitate engagement of classroom activities).

### **Tips on Organizing Assessment Information**

The frequency of gathering assessment information varies across information source. Many teachers find it valuable to select a representative item of a child's work on a weekly basis. Anecdotal records are important to generate daily, although an entry for a particular child may occur approximately weekly. Performance assessments and norm-referenced tests are useful for monitoring progress when conducted three times a year; for example, at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the program year.

A system is needed for organizing assessment information. Suggestions include the following:

- Develop a portfolio to keep all materials in one location
- Large file folders, pocket folders (decorated by child) or gallon-size Ziploc bags bound together with large metal rings are good organizers
- Put date and child's name on each item
- Confer with individual children about contributions to their portfolio
- Maintain a master list indicating when an item has been added to each child's portfolio

Vukelich et al. (2002) offer detailed suggestions for using a portfolio to organize assessment information (see chapter 8).

## **Using Assessment Information to Determine Individual Objectives**

### **Factors to consider**

The following factors can enhance decisions about individualized goals and experiences for children's literacy learning:

- Consider assessment information in relation to age-appropriate language and literacy benchmarks (for example, consult the IRA/NAEYC position statement and Committee on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children lists)
- Develop challenging yet achievable objectives for individual children in the context of existing or planned classroom activities and learning opportunities for all children

- Review and revise individual objectives on a frequent, regular basis (for example, monthly – use a staggered schedule so plans for 5 of 20 children are reviewed each week)
- Build on the child’s existing strengths and interests
- Develop in collaboration with the parent
- For children with special needs, develop language and literacy objectives within the framework of the child’s Individualized Education Program

### **Approaches to individualizing**

Tailoring learning goals and experiences can be accomplished through curriculum modifications, including embedded learning opportunities, and child-focused instructional strategies (Sandall & Schwartz, 2002).

A *curriculum modification* is a change in an on-going classroom activity or environment to achieve or maximize a child’s participation. *Embedded learning opportunities* are planned experiences within usual classroom activities and routines. Key characteristics include the following (from Sandall & Schwarz, 2002):

- Use child preferences
- Use environmental support
- Adapt materials
- Simplify the activity
- Provide adult support (if child gets frustrated writing name, teacher can model or offer praise and encouragement)
- Provide peer support
- Embed brief learning experiences or teaching episodes for a child within ongoing activities such as learning centers or classroom routines
- Plan intentional learning opportunities

*Child-focused instructional strategies* are planned and systematic, aimed at teaching specific skills, behaviors or concepts. Key characteristics include the following (from Sandall & Schwartz, 2002):

- Direct, explicit instruction
- May be particularly appropriate for children with special needs
- Follows same strategies as embedded learning opportunities but with greater intensity
- Generally occurs in context of an adult-child interaction
- Strategies include instructions, prompts, graduated guidance, reinforcement.

### **Curriculum modifications: Some examples** (from Sandall & Schwarz, 2002)

- If child does not remain long at the book corner, use books about highly preferred topics
- If child never uses the book area during free choice time, introduce child to area by having the child’s small group meet in the book corner
- If child has difficulty with turning the pages, use cardboard books or place bits of Styrofoam in upper right hand corner of the pages
- If child has difficulty operating tape player for audio book, use green tape for “start” and red tape for “stop” on buttons of tape record
- If child flips through the books and quickly leaves the book corner, pair the child with a classmate, have the classmate “read” a story, and then switch roles

- Target letter sounds by using alphabet blocks in the block area
- Provide experiences with a writing tool by having child sign up for a preferred activity such as computer station or on a name card to signify attendance
- Use sound lotto game to enhance listening skills
- Strengthen awareness of environmental print through art projects, including collages from magazines and newspapers

**Child-focused instructional strategies: Some examples** (from Sandall & Schwarz, 2002)

- Systematically teach a child to look at a book by using prompting and reinforcement techniques
- Teach a child who is making the transition to kindergarten to write his or her name using direct instruction or graduated guidance
- Teach a child to answer questions about a story by using visual support strategies and then systematically fade the prompts

### **Communicating With Parents and Primary Caregivers**

Parents can make valuable contributions to assessments of children's literacy development, as described earlier. The Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8 developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education emphasize the following (see Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1995):

- Assessment should support parents' relationships with their children and not undermine parents' confidence in their children's or their own ability, or devalue the language and culture of the family
- A regular process should exist for periodic information sharing between teachers and parents about children's growth and development performance. The method of reporting to parents should rely on meaningful, descriptive information in narrative form rather than letter or numerical grades.

The following guidelines for communicating with parents reflect these general principles:

- Regularly and in person, jointly review individualized goals for the child, share results of language and literacy assessments (portfolio), and suggest practices and learning supports within daily family routines (a key part of home visits)
- Consistently emphasize the child's strengths and progress, and carefully describe areas in need of further growth
- Regularly initiate communication with parents about child progress and accomplishments with language and literacy at home. Add this information to portfolio.
- Encourage and provide supports for parent and child to develop literacy items that become a part of the classroom (for example, a family album or an audiotape of a parent reading a child's favorite book).

In general, teachers' communications with parents and primary caregivers should be aimed at developing and maintaining a mutually supportive relationship between program and family. Families make significant contributions to children's literacy development. The *Guide to Improving Parenting Education in Even Start Family Literacy Programs* (Powell & D'Angelo, 2000) emphasizes the importance of program staff helping parents:

- Engage in frequent and increasingly complex verbal interactions with their child
- Actively participate in joint book reading
- Ask questions that strengthen their child's problem-solving abilities
- Provide easy access to reading and writing materials
- Read frequently themselves and use reading and writing to get things done and solve problems in everyday life.

### **Connections to Other Even Start Components**

There are many ways parents' contributions to the assessment of their child's literacy development can be incorporated into Even Start components. For example, adult educators can help parents maintain a daily journal on parent-child storybook reading experiences at home. Guiding questions here might include: What was read? How was the storybook selected? How did the child respond to the book? What type of conversation did you and your child have about the storybook?

The parent-child literacy interaction time, either during home visits or in center-based settings, is an ideal opportunity to tailor literacy experiences for a child. To provide information for individualizing these experiences, parents could prepare daily reflections (in writing or audiotape) on the child's behaviors and suggestions for tailoring activities that match a child's interests. This information could be reviewed jointly by teacher and parent as a part of planning parent-child interaction time experiences.

Home visits are rich opportunities for learning more about a child's literacy experiences in the family. For example, Tabors (1997) notes that English language learners' progress in learning English is likely to be influenced by his or her family's support for learning English. To learn more about family members' feelings about having their young child learn English, part of a home visit could be devoted to a supportive conversation in which staff *listen* to family members' thoughts about it means for a child to learn English at the Even Start program.

### **Program Implications**

The idea of using assessments to inform instruction entails far more than simply adding assessment activities to classroom routines. Teachers must be (1) knowledgeable about and instructionally committed to the domains being assessed, (2) able to engage in best practices related to each domain, and (3) know how to carry out effective procedures for gathering assessment information in each domain. An infrastructure is needed that provides teachers with time and support to learn how to implement assessments skillfully and "how to mine its results to the fullest" (Salinger, 2001, p. 402).

A well-managed classroom also is central to good assessment work, enabling a teacher to observe or work with individual or small groups of children without interruption (Johnston, 1987).

The implications of good assessments for Even Start programs, then, include the following:

- Teachers need professional development on key concepts and practices related to assessment
- Staffing arrangements should provide time for assessments and planning, including team meetings
- Staff need access to consultants on English language learners, children with special needs, and uses of assessment of assessment instruments

- Teachers need time for initiating and carrying out in-person individualized communications with parents, and perhaps staff development on working with parents as partners in the assessment process.

### References

American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education (1999). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Berk, L. E., & Winsler, A. (1995). *Scaffolding children's learning: Vygotsky and early childhood education*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Bredenkamp, S. & Rosegrant, T. (Eds.) (1992). *Reaching potentials: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children, Vol. 1*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Clay, M. M. (1985). *The early detection of reading difficulties, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* Auckland, NZ: Heinemann.

Clay, M. M. (1998). *By different paths to common outcomes*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

Dickinson, D. K., & DeTemple, J. (1998). Putting parents in the picture: Maternal reports of preschoolers' literacy as a predictor of early reading. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 13*, 241-261.

International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998). Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children. *Young Children, 53*, 30-46.

Johnston, P. (1987). Teachers as evaluation experts. *The Reading Teacher, 40*, 744-748.

Johnston, P. H., & Rogers, T. (2001). Early literacy development: The case for "informed assessment." In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 377-389). New York: The Guilford Press.

Meisels, S. J. (2000). The elements of early childhood assessment. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (pp. 231-257). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Morrow, L. M. (1988). *Literacy development in early years*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

National Center for Learning Disabilities (2001). *Get Ready to Read! Screening Tool*. Columbus, Ohio: Pearson Early Learning. ([www.getreadytoread.org](http://www.getreadytoread.org))

National Research Council (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. B. T. Bowman, M. S. Donovan, & M. S. Burns (Eds.), Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Neuman, S. B., Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (2000). *Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Powell, D. R., & D'Angelo, D. (2000). *Guide to improving parenting education in Even Start Family Literacy Programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Reid, D. K., Hresko, W. P., & Hammill, D. D. (2001). *Test of early reading ability, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* Austin, TX: PRO-ED, Inc.

Roskos, K. A., & Neuman, S. B. (1994). Of scribbles, schemas, and storybooks: Using literacy albums to document young children's literacy growth. *Young Children*, 78-85.

Salinger, T. (2001). Assessing the literacy of young children: The case for multiple forms of evidence. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 390-404). New York: The Guilford Press.

Sandall, S. R., & Schwartz, I. S. (2002). *Building blocks for teaching preschoolers with special needs*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Tabors, P. (1997). *One child, two languages: A guide for preschool educators of children learning English as a second language*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Vukelich, C., Christie, J., & Enz, B. (2002). *Helping young children learn language and literacy*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.