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Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practices in a Developmentally Inappropriate Climate: Assessment in Kindergarten

Martha Taylor Dever, Renee C. Falconer, and Cami Kessenich

But nearly a fourth of the students were unable to recognize letters, sounds, and words. Larson (pseudonym) called the results “distressing” and said teachers in kindergarten and first grade need to be better-trained to teach students basic elements of reading.

Kapos, Salt Lake Tribune, Salt Lake City, UT Saturday, February 12, 2000

If Georgia Harris (pseudonym) had her way, kids entering her kindergarten class could recite the alphabet, recognize numbers, colors, and shapes, and possess other basic preschool skills.

Bethel, Hattiesburg American, Hattiesburg, MS Tuesday, January 8, 2002

These newspaper excerpts, taken from two very different contexts, reflect general performance expectations for kindergarteners today that would have been unusual 20 or more years ago. In today’s national school climate, many kindergarten teachers are challenged by incongruence between their educational philosophies about developmentally appropriate practices and the emphasis on meeting standards, teaching basic skills, and standardized testing.

The United States is currently in a standards-driven school climate where a number of pressures have led to increased concern for teaching academic skills in kindergarten. Families are anxious for their children to learn academic skills as measured by concrete standards and standardized test scores. Schools have been accused of inadequately preparing all children in the area of basic skills (Spodak, 1996).

Accountability for meeting instructional standards is measured by assessment practices that often are inappropriate for young children.

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young children. Objective, quantifiable test scores are purportedly easy to understand and have appeal to parents and policy makers as indicators of achievement. Moreover, inappropriate Doser & Pierce practices designed to measure whether institutional standards have been met pose a threat to developmentally appropriate instruction because teachers are tempted to teach the test.

To combat the anticipated low scores on standardized tests, school districts in several states are resorting to developmentally inappropriate instructional strategies. For example, Suzanne, a National Board-certified teacher with 25 years of experience has taught all grades from kindergarten through 5 and declares kindergarten to be her love. Nevertheless, she made a difficult decision to leave the kindergarten classroom. Why? Because she could not reconcile her beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice when direct instruction strategies were mandated as the primary mode of literacy instruction in kindergarten. "I just couldn't do it," she said, "and I nearly got fired over my position on this issue."

In many kindergarten classrooms, there is inconsistency between research-based developmentally appropriate practice and assessment and actual instruction and assessment. The focus of this article is to link developmentally appropriate instruction and assessment with standards. Assessment of student achievement in kindergarten, when instruction and assessment are both developmentally appropriate and aligned with mandated standards, is described.

**Standardized Testing in Kindergarten**

Testing in U.S. schools is rooted in 19th-century European educational traditions and the development and acceptance of ideas such as intelligence quotient (IQ) and mental age (MA). Testing gained momentum in the U.S. with the emergence of the focus on education of the masses in the 19th century (Hammonds, 1998) and increased immigration and focus on special populations, such as persons with disabilities and developmental delays, in the 20th century (McAfee & Leong, 1994). Increases in federal and state resources for schools, characteristic of the 1960s, and the accountability movement rooted in the 1970s, led to a more frequent rise in the use of testing in general.

This increased use of tests has found its way into kindergarten and the primary grades (Dever & Barta, 2001; Perrone, 1990). In the interest of accountability, governors and legislators have initiated new, and more frequently used testing programs (Dever & Barta; Perrone, 1990; Scott-Little & Niemeyer, 2001). These tests are being used not just to determine children's readiness to enter kindergarten but, increasingly, they are being used to determine children's achievement and thus, their readiness to leave kindergarten (Perrone).

Testing in kindergarten and the primary grades receives a fair amount of criticism because of the mismatch between skills needed for test taking and the developmental nature of young children (McAfee & Leong, 1994). Meisels (1993) suggested that the test-taking experience is dominated with the processes of filling in bubbles and staying in the right place. These activities can be challenging for young children and have very little to do with the knowledge and skills being tested. Furthermore, tests provide limited information about children's actual academic progress. For example, test scores might reveal that a child is weak in letter knowledge but not show exactly which letters the child does not know.

Young children learn best in context as they interact with objects and people. Meisels (1993) notes that the content of standardized tests is generally abstract, verbally mediated, and can be biased against children who are unfamiliar with test taking. A better measure of children's achievement is systematic data collection from observation of their performance during their daily activities (Dever & Barta, 2001; Meisels).

**Assessment in Kindergarten**

Assessing the achievement of young children is a complex task (Scott-Little & Niemeyer, 2001). First, young children may develop unevenly, so they are likely to demonstrate advanced achievement in some areas and somewhat delayed achievement in others. Their learning is integrated.

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they have difficulty demonstrating their achievement in conventional ways, such as paper and pencil tests.

Kindergarten children learn best through active engagement with objects and people. Similarly, the best way to assess their achievement is in the context of their daily activities, a process referred to by early childhood scholars as performance or authentic assessment (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Dever & Barta, 2001; Meisels, 1993; Wiggins, 1989). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) implores teachers to systematically observe and document children's progress and analyze samples of their work. Furthermore, teachers should involve children and parents in evaluating children's efforts and accomplishments. Information from families should be considered as part of the assessment and parents should receive narrative evaluation information about their children's progress (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997).

Meisels (1993) has developed a performance assessment process called The Work Sampling System, which involves systematically gathering data on children's achievement via checklists, samples of children's work, and summary reports. Meisels' assessment plan incorporates developmentally appropriate and authentic or performance
assessment. Karen's story, presented later in this article, exemplifies how one teacher developed and implemented a similar assessment plan.

Meisels (1993) suggests that teachers observe daily learning activities, record information on checklists, collect artifacts, and organize them into portfolios. The checklists can be aligned with learning standards including state curriculum guidelines or district mandates. Examples of children's work are organized into portfolios, which are purposeful collections that demonstrate individual growth over time. These samples should be collected from a variety of activities and represent a range of learning domains. Summary reports can then be prepared to distill information from children's portfolios and checklists.

Assessing Standards-Based Instruction in Developmentally Appropriate Ways: Not an Oxymoron!

Many teachers have found ways to implement developmentally appropriate instruction and assessment practices while simultaneously meeting district or state standards. A portion of the kindergarten literacy standards from the Utah State Core Curriculum is cited in Figure 1 because it is generally representative of expectations in kindergarten in the broader national context. Standards #2 and #4 are expectations for reading comprehension in kindergarten.

Based on these standards, kindergarten children must be able to make logical predictions based on a story, adjust predictions based on thematic units, and enjoy an abundance of high-quality children's literature. Karen's units are integrated and focus on substantive content. Her students enjoy learning about their world. For example, in the unit Mostly Me, children learn about their bodies and abilities. Learning about colors, shapes, and numbers is integrated into this unit. In the unit What's for Lunch? children investigate the food groups and experience cooking. Letter study and vocabulary (e.g., same/different, ordinal numbers) are integrated into the unit.

Furthermore, each literacy unit includes finger plays, songs, chants, and art projects. As part of teaching the units, stories are read multiple times using a variety of developmentally appropriate instructional techniques—prediction, discussion, choral reading, actions, reenactments, and semantic mapping.

A short book is chosen from each unit to assess student progress. For example, for the unit Mostly Me, the book Something Special (Moon, 1997) is used for assessment, and for the unit, What's for Lunch? A Cake for Barney (Dunbar, 1988) is used for assessment. The Story Predictions Assessment (Figure 2) is completed by a trained observer who focuses on two children at a time as the teacher engages a group of children in story reading. Volunteers who work as trained observers include parents, teachers' aides, high school students, and volunteers from community organizations. Residents of retirement communities enjoy weekly volunteer work in classrooms. If volunteers are unavailable, older students may serve as readers to free the teacher to observe and record data.

To implement the assessment, a trained observer or teacher listens to the designated children and takes notes on their behaviors, noting as many of their comments as possible. Following the reading, Karen and the observer collaboratively complete the Story Predictions Assessment checklist. (A strikethrough indicates that the item is not assessed at that time.) Karen developed her own checklists and rubrics using the district-mandated standards and her knowledge of kindergarten children as her guide. For example, she notes students' attempts to make predictions about the story and the cues they use (illustrations or text) to note progress toward the standard. Students make predictions and confirm meaning.

The Reading Comprehension Assessment (Figure 3) takes place after children have thoroughly experienced the stories. Following the first unit, the assessment includes a simple retelling of the story and a comprehension question. For the assessment following the third unit, identification of the beginning, middle, and end of the story is added to the assessment. New items are periodically added to the assessment and by the time students reach the ninth unit, they are asked all of the questions on the assessment sheet.

As part of the assessment, children are asked to write and illustrate the story. While they are doing that, Karen individually (4 to 6 children per day) checks children's comprehension by asking them to retell the story, focusing on the questions on the assessment sheet. To score the assessment, correct answers are given one point, and incorrect answers are given zero points. The points are recorded on the checklists and tallied for an overall total.

Karen's 12 Thematic Units:

- Mostly Me
- What's for Lunch?
- Off to School
- Family Time
- Best Friends
- Pet Show
- Animals/Animals
- Rain or Shine
- Going Places
- Nighttime
- On the Farm
- Splash Splash

Adapted from Farr & Strickland (1993).
Points are also awarded based on the number of unrelated details the child provides in the story retelling and whether their illustration relates to the story. The assessment also has a place to record comments so that Karen has both numbers and comments when she talks with families.

The Writing Assessment Rubric (Figure 4) is used to assess stories the children write and illustrate during the time they are not being individually assessed by the teacher. To complete this assessment, Karen simply circles the box that best characterizes the child's writing in each of the areas listed. The rubric and the child's story from each unit can be reviewed collectively to assess writing development over time. These developmentally appropriate activities can be part of the kindergarten routine and used for instruction as well as assessment. Thus, assessment is not something that is added on to an already busy kindergarten schedule; rather, it is embedded in the curriculum.

**Communicating Student Achievement to Families**

Karen notes that parents' response to this assessment practice is overwhelmingly positive. She goes on to note that having the checklists and rubrics helps focus and provide clarity during her discussions with families about their children's progress. Children's scores may fluctuate somewhat from one story to the next because they have different backgrounds of experience and interest related to the content of each story or unit.

Teachers and families find that this assessment not only provides information about children's comprehension skills, but also an opportunity to identify children's interests by looking at their scores over time. Several parents indicated that they use this information to select books for reading at home. This assessment provides parents with useful information about their child. One commented, "I didn't know my child was capable of doing all of this [recalling details, identifying the beginning, middle, end]."

Another was impressed with her child's achievement and noted, "I didn't know there was so much involved in listening to a story."

Finally, parents indicate appreciation for the breadth of information this type of assessment provides and comment that they find this assessment more informative than traditional test scores. One parent noted, "This isn't like a test score. It tells a lot of information."

**Conclusions**

The strategies described here are one way that teachers meet mandated instructional standards while teaching and assessing in developmentally appropriate ways. Using this assessment system, Karen systematically collects data related to the standards and other knowledge and skills as well. For example, whether children have mastered Standard #4 can be determined as children recall the story events and the main ideas. Furthermore, teachers and parents garner additional information including the children's level of understanding of various details, the main characters, and the setting.

**Achievement of Standard #6**

Achievement of Standard #6 is demonstrated via this assessment as well. Based on children's writing and illustration of the story, teachers and families can notice skills such as directionality, ways children use letters to represent sounds and words, temporary and conventional spelling, and how they express their ideas with pictures and words.

In sum, testing is not enough. Multiple assessment measures administered over time provide the only valid assessment in kindergarten, the most complete picture of children's achievement, and a reliable indication that instructional standards have been attained.

**References**


The SECA Division for Development will award two grants of $1,000 each to 2004 to support staff and curriculum development, parent education and involvement, or leadership development. Individual members and SECA affiliates may apply.

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