Issues and Challenges in State Early Childhood Readiness Testing

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Key Issues in State Readiness Testing

1. Purpose
2. Pragmatics
3. Psychometrics
4. Policy

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I. What is the purpose of the test?

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(a) Reasons for Readiness Testing

- **Accountability:** Specification of how well individual children are performing in relation to a normative standard.

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What Policymakers Want to Know Today

"Are Children Learning?"

"Are public funds being used wisely?"

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(b) Reasons for Readiness Testing

- **Program evaluation:** Determination of how effectively a program has achieved its goals.

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In this presentation Dr. Meisels will mention several assessments. He is an author of one of them— the Work Sampling System—and a consultant to the company that publishes it, Pearson Education. These assessments will be cited solely to illustrate the points raised in the lecture, rather than to promote the assessments or imply an endorsement by any particular institution.

Why These Approaches Don't Work

- "Gaming the system"
- Impact of "summer loss"
- Ignoring the baseline
- Limitations of the assessments

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(c) Reasons for Readiness Testing

- **Achievement:** Documentation of what children know and can do.

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II. What are the practical problems of implementation?

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(a) Who will be assessed?

- Sample: Generalize about the state
- Universe: Use the data to make instructional decisions

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(b) Which readiness test will be used?

- Adopt
- Adapt
- Invent

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(c) What test format will be followed?

- On-Demand
- Observational

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On-Demand Assessments

Norm-referenced assessments that compare a child's specific knowledge and skills to those of other children of the same age.

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Observational Assessments

Functional assessments based on teachers' observations of children engaged in performing tasks that are part of their daily experience.

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(d) What content will the test cover?

- Construct representation
- Construct-relevant variance

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Construct Underrepresentation

The extent to which a test fails to capture important aspects of the construct it is intended to measure.

(AERA/APA/NCME, 1999)

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Compared to the *Head Start Child Outcomes Framework*:

The NRS covers only 15 of 46 indicators in language, literacy, and mathematics—

33% of the total

— and none of the 54 indicators in the other five domains of the *Framework*.

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Construct-Irrelevant Variance

The extent to which test scores are influenced by factors that are irrelevant to the constructs the test is intended to measure.

(AERA/APA/NCME, 1999)

(e) Who will administer the assessment and what training/professional development will be provided?

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III. Psychometrics (or, How do we know we can believe what we're told?)

- Validity
- Reliability
- Fairness

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Predicting Children's Competence from Readiness Assessments

- On average, only 25% of variance in early academic/cognitive performance is predicted from preschool or kindergarten cognitive status.
- Only 10% or less of the variance in K–2 social/ behavioral measures is predicted by social/behavioral assessments at preschool or kindergarten.
- *"Instability or change may be the rule rather than the exception during this period."*

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-LaParo & Pianta, 2000

IV. Policy (or, How will the test data be used and what social benefits will readiness testing confer?)

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Making Assessments of "Readiness" Meaningful

Meaningful assessment of young children's readiness to learn calls for a comprehensive view of learning and development.

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"Take Aways" About Early Childhood Readiness

1. It's not in the child or the environment
2. "Readiness" begins at birth
3. It can't be defined by a single set of skills or accomplishments
4. Readiness is best assessed observationally
5. Instructional in purpose, not high-stakes

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