

# Assessment and Instruction in Early Childhood Education: Early Literacy as a Microcosm of Shifting Perspectives

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*Not everything that counts can be counted.  
And not everything that can be counted counts.*

—Attributed to Albert Einstein

Determining what counts, and what does not, as evidence of young children's development has become an increasingly complex issue for early childhood educators. A broad range of stakeholders in the education of young children, from parents and teachers to administrators and policy-makers, have their own views about how children develop and how learning should be supported and assessed in American schools. There is often vehement disagreement about what constitutes appropriate evidence of achievement and equally passionate differences of opinion about how that evidence should be collected, analyzed, reported, and used to make instructional decisions (Allington, 2002; Johnson & Rogers, 2001; Salinger, 2001, 2006; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

Some of this disagreement stems from fundamentally differing understandings of what assessment is and how it should be used. Policy makers such as federal legislators, government appointees, and state or local school board members often see assessment as a means of enforcing accountability. They look to measures of children's performance as indicative of the quality of schools, programs, and teachers. This view became especially prevalent with the advent of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) legislation that placed a premium on standardized, quantifiable data regarding children's progress in a number of academic areas, with a significant emphasis on their early literacy achievement.

Other stakeholders, especially parents and teachers who are closely engaged in children's day-to-day learning, are likely to view assessment as a means of determining what children are able to do at different points in their development and what support they will need in order to continue developing increasingly sophisticated abilities. They tend to view assessment as an ongoing process of monitoring children's development over time to ensure that learning is occurring and to guide instructional decisions that shape how they engage children in activities throughout the day.

## CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Disagreements about the nature of learning and the purpose of assessment are not merely academic or political. There is no question that assessment often drives instruction. Mandated assessments, in particular, indicate what counts as evidence of children's

learning. As standardized, skills-based assessments have moved to the forefront in the past decade, so too have the skills they measure. The more teachers are required to demonstrate children's achievement via improvements in standardized, skills-based assessments, the more they feel pressured to focus instruction on the assessed skills. Unfortunately, the skills most often assessed with standardized measures are "constrained skills"—those that are limited to small sets of knowledge that are mastered in relatively brief periods of development (Paris, 2005). Rapid naming of alphabet letters and the ability to isolate initial phonemes in spoken words are examples of constrained skills. Acquiring vocabulary and understanding the implied meaning of stories are examples of unconstrained skills because children move toward ever-increasing levels of mastery of these skills as they continue to learn them over many years.

Focus on constrained skills increasingly comes at the expense of the support for multiple aspects of development that has long been the hallmark of high-quality early childhood education. Evaluations of early childhood settings and curricula typically entail examination of the manner in which children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth are supported (see for example, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC, 2009]; and *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales* [Harms & Clifford, 2005]). NAEYC's guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice include among its "principles of child development and learning that inform practice" (p. 10), an acknowledgment that children's learning and development are affected by everything they encounter in their lives, reflecting an ecological perspective of early education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979.) This ecological perspective posits that children's learning and development are supported within and across microsystems (patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced in face-to-face settings) and exosystems (settings and events that indirectly influence the immediate, face-to-face setting). A narrowing of the curriculum so that constrained skills are prioritized in early childhood, however, neglects the consideration of the whole child and the full range of environmental influences that shape learning. In fact, the narrowing of the school curriculum may be transferred to and reflected in children's entire interconnected web of environmental influences. As schools trumpet the importance of constrained skills, after-school childcare program administrators, parents, and many others in the children's communities may narrow their opportunities for richer learning and development as the professionals strive to support those aspects of learning they surmise to

be most important to school success. This narrowing of opportunity is especially pernicious for children of poverty and can only serve to increase the gaps in knowledge and vocabulary between children who live in poverty and children who have more opportunities, effects that have been well documented by researchers such as Hart and Risley (1995).

## EARLY LITERACY AS A MICROCOSM OF EARLY EDUCATION

A review of the research published in the last decade will highlight a shift toward concern with the academic achievement of young children. A significant number of the academically oriented articles, particularly those published in the last 5 years, report on research related to young children's language and literacy development and learning. This emphasis on early literacy can be traced to a number of concurrent influences. When the NAEYC published the first expanded revision of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredenkamp, 1986), the position statement was criticized for lack of sufficient attention to emergent literacy, a field of study that had grown at that time and offered significant new insight into how children become literate. In response, the NAEYC collaborated with the International Reading Association (IRA) to produce a joint position statement, *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (NAEYC/IRA, 1998). Within a few years of that publication, federal legislators passed PL 107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. While the approaches to primary grades literacy espoused by the educators and the legislators differed significantly, official attention to early literacy was well established, with authorization of federal funding for the Early Reading First Program (ERF) under the auspices of NCLB in 2002. Given this significant influx of funding for preschool early literacy instructional programs, it is no wonder that early literacy development and learning have come to dominate many discussions of early childhood education.

Even within the research literature on early literacy, shifting perspectives are evident and reflect the same narrowing of emphasis that is present in the broader field of early childhood education. The earliest research on emergent literacy focused on discovering—and celebrating—the ways that young children conceptualize print. Studies documented how children were able to develop reading skills prior to formal schooling (Durkin, 1966; Clay, 1966, 1971), the logic of their emergent spelling (Gentry, 1978; Read, 1975, 1986), their abilities to retell stories though pretend reading (Sulzby, 1985), their knowledge of story structure as evidenced in their dramatic play (Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Roskos & Christie, 2007), and their ability to use writing in a variety of forms and for myriad purposes given appropriate opportunities, experiences, and environmental supports (Schickedanz, 1990; Dyson, 1982, 1984, 2002). This work demonstrates that young children's motivation to read and write can be enhanced as they come to understand the functional value of these processes.

More recently, however, there has been a decided emphasis on identifying early literacy skills that children need to master as

prerequisites for later reading, with particular attention to alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming (of letters and objects, for example), writing and name writing, and phonological memory (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). There is no question that these skills do contribute to children's eventual success with conventional reading and writing. They do not, however, address the importance of motivating children to use print for the functional purposes they understand. Similarly, whereas initial early intervention studies broadly addressed improving classroom and home environmental support for emergent reading and writing (Edwards, 1991, 1994; Neuman & Gallagher, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1989; Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994), recent interventions are more likely to focus on specific skills instruction (see Casbergue & McGee, 2010, for a full discussion of historical perspectives).

## PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND ASSESSMENT

These shifting perspectives of early literacy development and learning can be traced to evolving views of emergent literacy assessment. The desire to assess the abilities of young children dates back at least to the 1930s when Gessell's (1925) investigation of young children's cognitive maturation swayed educators to attempt to determine when children would be ready for literacy instruction. Informed by Gessell's work, Morphet and Washburn (1932) conducted a study that purported to demonstrate that children must reach a mental age of 6.5 in order for literacy instruction to be effective. This finding supported the widespread belief in the concept of *readiness*—the idea that until children have reached the optimum age and capacity for learning to read, instruction in literacy skills will be useless—or worse—damaging, to children's development. Many educators of that era believed, therefore, that it was sufficient to simply wait until children's maturation caught up with the demands of literacy learning before engaging children in reading instruction (Gallagher, 1948; Monroe, 1932).

Other educators were not as comfortable with simply waiting, however, and their desire to provide appropriate instruction led them to rely on readiness testing as a means of identifying skills that were lacking and thus preventing children from benefiting from literacy instruction. Based on the results of this testing, educators proposed that early literacy instruction should take the form of activities that would prepare children for a later introduction to reading (Frostig & Horne, 1964; Williams, 1969). Soon, the belief that it is necessary to teach directly the prerequisite skills for reading and writing became deeply rooted in programs for children in kindergarten or even first grade. Because the focus was on prerequisite skills, early readiness instruction often avoided anything resembling actual reading or writing. Instead, children were engaged in activities that were thought to foster pre-reading skills like visual discrimination of figures, including those that resembled—but were not—letters of the alphabet. Children also spent instructional time engaging in activities that were intended to help them develop the gross and fine motor skills and eye-hand

coordination presumed to be prerequisites for actual writing (Barsch, 1967; Delacato, 1966).

These readiness views of literacy learning and instruction are grounded in the Piagetian view of development, informed, in part, by a theory that suggests that development occurs before learning, and as a result, learning cannot occur until the necessary cognitive milestones have been reached (Piaget, 1928). In keeping with this interpretation of Piaget's view of the stages of development, those who espoused his theories of child development created instructional programs that presented children with only those concepts for which they were assumed to be ready, and delayed exposure to more sophisticated concepts that required children to have progressed to more advanced stages of development.

The subskills concept inherent in a readiness perspective carried over into the instruction children received once they were deemed ready to learn to read and write. In keeping with the idea that literacy is attained through mastery of a series of simple skills built one upon the next, early literacy instruction often took the form of direct instruction in isolated skills that were viewed as fundamental building blocks for reading and writing. Children were taught to recite the alphabet and to recognize and write individual letters. They were taught individual sounds and then introduced to blending phonic elements into words. Eventually, after much isolated practice and exposure to a number of sight words, children were introduced to carefully controlled connected text. They then practiced reading increasingly complex narratives, usually with more emphasis on word recognition and decoding than on comprehension.

The views of young children's literacy learning and development derived from both Gesell's and Piaget's theories are in direct contrast to the social constructivist view of learning. This perspective is based in large part on the work of Vygotsky (1962), who espoused the view that learning leads development. That is, children's development and learning are enhanced as they engage with others in social practices, including reading and writing, that guide them to more sophisticated understanding. From this perspective, it is important to invite even very young children into the world of literate activity. They become apprentices to those with more knowledge about reading and writing, and gradually construct and refine their own understanding of how language and print function together. In fact, language itself (certainly an unconstrained skill) is critically important in Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development, with oral language an important component of any constructivist approach to literacy learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

A constructivist view of literacy learning, including the theory presented by Sulzby and Teale (1986) in their book *Emergent Literacy*, suggests that children need not have reached a particular mental age or level of development to begin learning to read and write. Rather, even toddlers can begin to be socialized into literacy as they share reading experiences with caregivers and peruse books on their own. From a very young age, children in literate environments learn to value reading and writing, and they begin to hypothesize about what print means and how print functions in

relation to oral language. Early literacy instruction that is designed from this perspective assumes that children will attempt to read and write as a natural part of their everyday experiences, and thus emergent literacy approaches now routinely begin in preschool. There, children pretend to read, often with clearly recognizable book reading intonation and occasionally using much of the actual language they have heard when familiar books were read to them. They pretend to write, at first with linear scribbles that are gross approximations of lines of print and soon with a variety of letters, some of their own creation and others, attempts at writing real alphabet letters. These types of reading and writing occur first in the context of their play and later as they are invited to use print to communicate in more directed classroom activities.

While constructivist perspectives are still prevalent in the emergent literacy literature, many researchers (especially in the fields of medicine and special education) and national panels charged with synthesizing quantitative research related to early literacy have turned educators' focus back toward teaching and assessing children's mastery of isolated skills. In opposition to readiness perspectives, however, this type of instruction now occurs as early as the preschool years. As research has demonstrated the extent to which certain skills are correlated with later literacy ability (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; NELP, 2008), teachers have felt enormous pressure to provide direct and explicit instruction in those skills. Whether they are intentionally teaching in ways that they believe will prevent later reading difficulties (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) or simply following mandates from policy makers, an increasing portion of young children's day is spent in pursuit of constrained literacy skills.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY LITERACY ASSESSMENT

Obviously, such opposing views of literacy learning and instruction correlate with equally opposing beliefs about what should be assessed in order to document children's literacy development and learning. Readiness and subskills views place a premium on the isolated skills that are thought to be prerequisite to literacy learning and on the knowledge that is believed to form the foundation for eventual fluent reading of connected text. Assessments designed in accordance with a readiness viewpoint test, for example, whether children can discriminate among sounds heard in oral language, and whether they know which letters represent those sounds. In sum, they focus on constrained skills related to children's ability to manipulate isolated aspects of print.

In contrast, educators who espouse views of literacy development and learning more grounded in constructivist theories place a premium on children's literacy behaviors in a variety of contexts. They look for evidence of how children understand print—its forms, functions, and meanings, and the connections between meaning and form (McGee & Richgels, 2008). While they are keenly interested in children's knowledge about many of the same aspects of print as are those who hold a readiness perspective, they look for evidence of that knowledge in the authentic literacy

activities in which children engage (Ratcliff, 2001). Thus, while they may be interested in which letters a child recognizes and can form correctly, for example, they are equally interested in when children use those letters and what they understand about how the letters function in the creation of meaning.

The impact of these differing priorities on early literacy assessment is substantial. The kind of constrained knowledge most highly valued by readiness and skills proponents is easily measured and quantified. How many of the 26 letters in the English language alphabet does a child know? Can a child hear individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken language? Can a child blend or segment the phonemes? How many sight words from a list of high-frequency words can a child recognize? Can a child apply the knowledge of letters and sounds to the reading of nonsense words? Asking only these kinds of questions leads to the development of standardized assessments that attempt to directly measure children's knowledge about print. These standardized assessments ask all children to respond to the same sets of questions that are presented in the same way and yield either correct or incorrect answers. The number of correct responses can be counted, and children's performance on these measures can be compared across teachers, schools, and increasingly, states.

The kind of knowledge prioritized by those grounded in more constructivist views of learning and development, on the other hand, is often more qualitative than quantitative. These educators seek to learn the conditions under which a child engages in literate behavior and the details of the behavior itself. They want to find out what children understand about the connection between letters and sounds, not just which letters and sounds they know. They are concerned about how children use language to tell stories and share information, and they want to learn what children understand about storytelling language and the language of informational text. They recognize that the literacy knowledge of young children emerges over time and is constantly evolving, and that what they appear to know well in one context may not be evident in a different situation. These kinds of questions are not amenable to standardized assessments. From this perspective, assessment must be as individualized as children's learning. Assessment information that results from these types of questions cannot be easily quantified and counted, nor can it always be used to make comparisons across children, classrooms, or schools.

## **DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT**

Belief that assessment is the source of multiple ills in classrooms for young children may lead some teachers to eschew calls for documenting children's learning and development. To do so would be a mistake. Understanding children's development—across a variety of domains—is critically important to effective instruction. In order to make wise use of a variety of assessment tools, however, educators must first develop an understanding of the difference between summative testing and formative assessment, a distinction often lost on policy makers. The term assessment refers

to a "broad repertoire of behaviors involved in noticing, documenting, recording, and interpreting children's behaviors and performance" (Johnson & Rogers, 2001, p. 377). Testing refers to a subset of those assessment behaviors in which children's "performances are controlled and elicited in standardized conditions" (Johnson & Rogers, 2001, p. 378). While the term "assessment" thus encompasses testing, those who use the word "assessment" to describe the process of gathering information about children's learning do so in a way that implies more fluid interactions between teachers or evaluators and children, with activities designed to help children demonstrate what they know and can do in a variety of contexts and with varying levels of support. Often the assessment activities are designed to mirror the contexts in which children are accustomed to demonstrating their knowledge. Formative assessment attempts to paint rich portraits of children as they grow and learn.

The term "testing" suggests more rigid interactions during which teachers or evaluators attempt to determine children's levels of achievement and quantify what they do and do not know in a particular, predefined context. In the realm of early literacy, that context often bears little resemblance to the everyday world of reading and writing in which young children are immersed. Rather, children are asked to answer questions and respond to print that bears no resemblance to anything they have seen before. This is especially true of standardized testing, a method of measuring children's knowledge that holds constant what children are asked to do, how they are asked to do it, and what constitutes an adequate response. This type of testing is more likely to capture a snapshot of a child's literacy—one that may not actually resemble the child as a literate being and may be rather distorted.

While much has been made of the dichotomy between standardized, or formal, testing and more informal, observational assessment, researchers more recently have reconsidered the labels for each type of information gathering. Words like "formal" and "standardized" lend an air of official sanction to tests that bear those labels. Descriptors like "informal" or "observational" lead some to imply that such assessments are less rigorous and yield less important information. Instead, Johnson and Rogers (2001) have suggested that these different types of assessment be labeled, respectively, "traditional" and "documentary." The phrase "documentary assessment" makes explicit the primary function of such assessment—documenting children's learning over time in contrast to traditional assessment that is concerned only with quantifying children's knowledge or ability at one particular point in time.

## **THE PLACE FOR TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT**

While many classroom teachers and other early childhood educators prefer documentary assessment and see little value in standardized tests of children's literacy knowledge, it can be argued that there are two functions of assessment that can be addressed most readily through the use of traditional assessments. Most notably, the functions include evaluating the effectiveness of programs and determining eligibility for children who may be in need

of specialized services to support their learning (NAEYC, 1991).

Particularly when programs are instituted across classrooms or schools, or when they are externally funded, evaluation of their effectiveness requires comparing children's performance across settings. Such comparisons can be made only if the same data about children's performance have been collected and only if the data have been collected in the same way. In this case, the emphasis is less on what individual children can do, and more on how programs affect the learning of a group of children.

It is also traditional practice to use standardized tests to determine a child's need and eligibility to receive special education services. Since such services are most often federally funded, criteria for access to special education programs have typically been set at the federal level. Once again, standardized tests provide a means of gathering consistent information across populations of children to determine whether they meet those criteria. Further, standardized tests are usually nationally normed, or piloted, with a representative group of children from across the entire country. Scores that indicate adequate achievement (as well as accelerated or inadequate achievement) are derived from this population's performance on the pilot tests.

Standardized tests chosen for program evaluation purposes are often selected on the basis of ease of administration and scoring. Simply put, these tests are easy to administer to large numbers of children in a relatively short time frame, and because the items tend to have single correct answers that are often chosen from a set of possible responses, the tests can be scored quickly, and reports can be generated by mechanical means.

Group-administered standardized tests are also used to screen children in order to determine their eligibility for special services. Children whose performance on these tests falls significantly below the norm are usually singled out for further individual assessment to verify their need for additional instructional support. At other times, children who demonstrate significant discrepancy in performance across different subtests on a particular standardized measure are identified for additional testing to determine if there is one area of significant weakness that must be addressed with more specialized instruction.

## NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF USING TESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

While many educators have accepted standardized testing for the purposes of program evaluation and decision-making about special education placement, not all agree that traditional tests are appropriate even for these narrow purposes. Standardized tests, especially those that are group administered, have been criticized as being so unlike normal literacy activity that they make no sense to children. This is problematic in that "what dominates the whole enterprise when children actually take the tests is test-taking behavior—filling in bubbles, moving the marker, making sure everyone is in the right place. These activities may be related to test taking, but they have nothing to do with reading" (Stallman & Pearson, 1990, p. 38).

Salinger (2001) supports the notion that group administered standardized tests measure factors other than children's literacy knowledge:

Children may do poorly on a standardized test because they find the tasks strange and inaccessible; the tests then measure their confusion rather than their skills. They may do poorly because they have been asked to sit still longer than they are able; this can be especially true if a reading test is part of a larger test battery. . . . Their scores can be thought of as "noisy" or flawed because the tests have been influenced by extraneous variables such as confusion or disengagement. (p. 392)

Allington (2002) has presented cogent arguments that suggest that group standardized tests are not reliable measures of children's individual achievement. He notes that "psychometric scientists agree that it is unscientific to use a single test performance to make decisions about individuals, including decisions about grade promotion or retention and about what a child knows, what needs to be taught, and how to teach it" (p. 244). His argument underscores the contradiction inherent in federal mandates that require the use of scientifically based reading research as the basis for instructional programs, without regard for any scientific evidence that the use of standardized assessments positively affects children's learning.

Of equal concern is *what* is typically assessed, particularly in the area of literacy. Traditional standardized tests tend to assess children "on isolated skills in decontextualized settings rather than on reading tasks in situations in which they are asked to behave like readers" (Stallman & Pearson, 1990, p. 38). The items on the tests are dominated by an emphasis on sound-symbol knowledge, suggesting a belief that knowledge of this aspect of print is the primary goal of early reading. Finally, the group-administered tests usually require children to simply recognize—not produce or identify—targeted aspects of print such as letters and words.

All of these features of standardized tests are at odds with a view of literacy learning as a constructive process. Almost five decades of emergent literacy research has demonstrated that even young children are capable of producing meaningful responses to print and using print for their own purposes (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1966, 1970, 1975), yet that ability is virtually ignored in typical standardized tests of early literacy. As Stallman and Pearson (1990) noted,

An important . . . point to consider in regard to these measures of early literacy is the message they are sending about what really counts. If you take the tests to be a reflection of the field's priorities in early literacy instruction, then what matters most is the child's ability to recognize pictures, letters, and sounds so they will be ready, someday, for the real thing. (p. 38)

Of equal concern is the impact that standardized tests have on children. Because traditional assessments measure decontextualized

skills in isolation from the authentic literacy activities in which most children readily engage, they may not have the opportunity to demonstrate the full range of their knowledge. This is especially problematic because traditional tests of early literacy typically exclude the kinds of skills that are strong predictors of comprehension at grade 3 and beyond. Conversely, some children may be quite adept at matching sounds and symbols or naming letters, for example, but have relatively little understanding of how those skills relate to actual reading and writing. Given the fact that standardized tests are most often used for the purpose of program evaluation and special education placement, underestimating or overestimating children's knowledge may have serious consequences both for the young children individually and for early literacy programs in general (Allington, 2002; Johnson & Rogers, 2001; Salinger, 2006; Shepard, 1991, 1994, 1997).

By comparing children's performance to predetermined norms, standardized tests lend themselves to a focus on deficits, labeling children as not ready, delayed, or disabled. Whether the consequence of these labels is placement in special education or communication to parents that their children have "special needs," there is potential for children to receive a completely different approach to early literacy and other areas of learning than their peers who are deemed more "normal." There is also the significant likelihood that even more of the child's day will be focused on "deficit" areas, at the expense of activities that address the needs of the whole child.

When the tests are used for program evaluation, the impact can be just as serious. The standardized tests that dominate the field adhere to the belief that complex processes like those required for reading and writing can be simplified into component parts, each of which can be tested separately. Testing programs that demonstrate children's difficulty mastering those component parts will inevitably lead to pressure for more direct instruction in the assessed constrained skills. Programs that bow to that pressure have no choice but to compromise time spent on authentic, constructive activities that are more in keeping with longstanding traditions in early childhood education and with current understanding of how young children learn.

## THE PROMISE OF DOCUMENTARY ASSESSMENT

Many of the problems associated with traditional assessments can be overcome through the use of documentary, or observational, assessment. Unlike traditional standardized tests that measure skills in isolation from authentic activity (whether reading, writing, sorting, counting, or building), documentary assessments entail observing, recording, and analyzing the behaviors that children demonstrate in the context of everyday activities. Literacy researchers have argued that the latter types of assessments are likely to yield more accurate pictures of children's literacy learning than are traditional tests (Allington, 2002; Shepard, 1997; Teale, 1990; Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004).

Situated assessment—that which occurs in the context of activities and contexts that are familiar to children—is especially

promising because it has great potential to positively affect teaching and learning. Many educators have pointed out that the primary goal of assessment should be to optimize student learning. A broad range of professional organizations concerned with the education and assessment of young children, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredenkamp & Coppel, 1997; NAEYC, 2009), the International Reading Association (NAEYC/IRA, 1998), and the National Forum on Assessment (Phye, 1997) have supported this position. Documentary assessments hold the greatest promise for helping educators to connect assessment to meaningful instruction that addresses the development and learning of the whole child.

This view is affirmed, in part, because observational assessments allow for documentation of children's behaviors in situations that may closely resemble the experiences they have had at home before they begin formal schooling. For example, long before they can read and write conventionally, children experiment with print in ways that help them discover the purposes of reading and writing as well as the ways to accomplish these processes. Observing this experimentation, whether it occurs as children are playing or engaging in shared reading and writing activities with caregivers or teachers, affords an opportunity to document their understandings about literacy. Documenting what children do when they are actually reading or writing enables educators to understand what children know and are able to do. The vocabulary children use as they describe pictures they are drawing or reenact a story they have heard provides insight into how they understand and use language. The forms of writing that appear in their drawings, journals, signs, and notes to each other illustrate what they understand about the forms, functions, and meanings of print. Their attempts at reading aloud, whether during pretend reading or as they follow print during shared, guided, or independent reading, reveal their understanding of the connections between sounds and symbols, as well as their knowledge of how print connects to meaning.

The tensions between testing constrained skills and assessing a full range of abilities inherent in early literacy are also played out across other areas of development. Just as documentary assessment holds promise for broadening and deepening teachers' understanding of children's literacy development, this type of assessment can also enhance their understanding of children's development across multiple domains. Once educators have a full understanding of children's capabilities, they will be able to determine the developmental steps that are likely to occur next in individual children and target instructional interactions to support that development. Recent attempts to extract from research the sequence in which children typically develop particular insights, skills, and abilities have resulted in a number of descriptions of standards and benchmarks for development and learning that can be used to guide both assessment and instruction. Awareness of what can generally be expected from typically developing children can facilitate teachers' planning of instructional activities for individuals and groups of children.

A teacher who observes that a child uses random letters when writing knows that the next step in that child's spelling development is likely to be early invented spelling in which a letter representing a single sound will be used to write an entire word. Thus, the teacher's task is to help that child begin to make the connection between letters and sounds and to draw the child's attention to the initial sounds in words the child wants to write. The same teacher might observe that another child in the class often becomes absorbed in playing with character props to retell stories that have been read aloud, but notices that he rarely includes major events, instead simply repeating bits of dialogue. Thus, her task is to help the youngster attend to the sequence of events while listening to stories and to gradually guide an understanding of typical narrative story structure.

Similarly, teachers can observe and document behaviors that indicate development and learning in other domains that afford, as well, insights into the cognitive abilities that are critical to literacy development. For example, a child who helps to distribute milk cartons to tablemates at snack time demonstrates a developing understanding of one-to-one correspondence; children playing at a science center who discover how to enlarge shadows by adjusting the distance between objects and their flashlights offer insight into the development of scientific thinking; and children taking turns during dramatic play suggest their promise to participate in conversations and discussion of books. Teachers can infer from this kind of documentary assessment what children know and can do across a variety of activities and with varying levels of support, as well as what kinds of instructional supports they require to continue to learn.

## CONCLUSION

Different perspectives regarding early literacy learning, assessment, and teaching are in many ways a microcosm of differing perspectives about what matters in early learning in general. Emphasis on increasingly narrow aspects of early literacy is reflective of a broader shift toward concern for children's cognitive development over other areas of development. In an environment that places a premium as early as preschool on academic learning and constrained skills that are easily counted, is it any wonder that teachers struggle to find time for outdoor play; exploration of centers; and science, art, music, and movement?

One way to recover the flexibility to provide developmentally appropriate instruction is to reclaim the right to document the full spectrum of children's development and learning across multiple domains using authentic, naturalistic assessment practices. Rigorous application of this type of documentary assessment is a necessary counterbalance to the overemphasis on constrained skills that is pushing early childhood education in more academic directions to the exclusion of a balanced program that includes unconstrained skills. Only when teachers are able to use assessment to demonstrate that children are acquiring important skills and abilities—even when they play and direct

their own learning—will the field of early childhood education return to a broader conceptualization of teaching and learning. Teachers who have gathered carefully collected and well-documented assessment information in addition to scores from traditional tests are especially well positioned to support all aspects of children's development and learning—and to begin to change perceptions about what counts and what should be counted in early childhood education.

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