

## **FIRST, DO NO HARM!**

### **Toward Developmentally Appropriate Assessment practice:**

In a 2008 seminar with Dr. David Elkind,<sup>i</sup> CAYL Principal Fellows<sup>ii</sup> were encouraged to “preserve childhood.” What makes early education unique is that it begins with the child and not with specific curriculum, separated subject matter, and direct instruction. Since the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, education has increasingly focused on issues of accountability, with one result being the development and use of wide-scale assessment systems for young children. This is counter-indicative to the preservation of childhood.

#### **OBSERVATIONS AND CONCERNS:**

CAYL Principal Fellows observed the assessment of young children in their various school districts and express the following five concerns:

- 1. Young children are tested too often.** In one Principal’s tabulation, four-year-old children (pre-kindergarten) in her district were subjected to at least 10 assessments or tests over the course of a school year. Another Principal reported that five-year-old children (kindergarten) in their district were subjected to over 20 tests and assessments between September and May.
- 2. The tests used have questionable reliability and validity for measuring teaching and learning outcomes with young children.** Principals report that; test administrators are often inadequately trained; the content of the test influences what is valued learning; tests focus on measurable skills versus complex thinking and problem solving in context, and; there is too often a lack of understanding by many of how to integrate curriculum and assessment strategies that support children’s learning. In some schools, the kindergarten assessment schedule for 14 consecutive days requires teachers to observe, test, and record 11 different measures for each child in their class. If there are 20 children in a kindergarten class, the teacher would administer 220 assessments over 14 school days.
- 3. The tests are developmentally inappropriate for young children.** Kindergarten children may be expected to complete tasks which they are developmentally unsuited for. These tasks include reading and filling in bubble sheets on standardized tests in order to show knowledge gained. They may also be subject to developmentally inappropriate practices such as having multiple persons administer the same test, including people who the child does not know, or taking the child out of the classroom and testing individually in an unfamiliar space. This can raise the child’s anxiety level and affect test performance.
- 4. There is a lack of planning about how to actually use the extensive and frequent testing for the benefit of teaching and instruction.** When research and

knowledge of assessment strategies for children from the age of three through the third grade are not reflected in school district policies, then the tests being used and the way they are administered do not truly help schools improve important aspects of children's development, such as problem solving, creativity and social emotional skills. These aspects of development provide critical foundations for future learning and cannot be measured by standardized tests. For example, one principal reported, *"I was watching a child trying to match beginning letter sounds with pictures. He was looking at a small drawing of a goat, and saying to himself 'sheep, sh-sh-sh-sheep'. Of course he did not select the letter g and his answer was wrong. Moreover he was very frustrated at not being able to find an answer. In fact, the child was using a lot of good strategies and demonstrating an understanding of beginning letter sounds very well. It's very troubling. Even distinguishing between small pictures of farm animals that are about the same size and have similar characteristics presents a challenge for a young child."*

- 5. The tests are particularly challenging for the increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELL) in the school district.** One Principal explained, *"We have to look closely at the children and constituencies in our schools. My school is 90% ELL but I only have one bilingual certified teacher. Despite being a high ELL school, there is no one savvy enough to look at the curriculum and make the adjustments so children can learn. Instead of focusing on all this testing, we have to focus on being able to be responsive to the children in the schools."*

#### TOWARD MORE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE:

Here are five guidelines that principals can consider as they examine their assessment of children ages three through age eight:

- 1. Recognize that there are valid reasons for testing young children.** Assessment can promote children's learning and development, identify children for health and special services, monitor trends and evaluate programs and services, and promote appropriate levels of accountability.
- 2. Be clear about your purpose and intentionality in assessment.** Ask yourself: Do we have a clear vision and strategic plan with continuous, comprehensible, and timely communication of the purpose/goals for the implementation and evaluation of an assessment system? Is there a clear plan to communicate with families, teachers and others about the current and future use of data collected? Is there a commitment and method to ensure confidentiality of both child and program data?
- 3. Purposeful training and preparation of teachers and other test administrators is essential.** Schools must prioritize a focus on building program staff capacity to understand the purpose, uses, and cautions of an assessment system.

4. **Use caution.** Kindergarten age determination should be based on chronological age, not on testing for mastery of skills. Recognize that norm-referenced tests may be inappropriate for young children. Valid and reliable information about young children requires multiple measures at multiple points over time. Avoid high-stakes testing: It is not technically defensible to administer formal measures and hold grade-level standards before third grade. Be sure that information will be provided about program improvement and that tests are accompanied by assessments of the learning environments and supports.
  
5. **Lead, with others, for more effective assessments systems of young children in your community.** Help your district avoid using standardized tests as the sole source of information being used to make decisions about placing children in special education or labeling young children. Such decisions require more complex methods of assessment. Be sure to consider the backgrounds, needs and languages of the children in your district when exploring appropriate assessment strategies for your school.

Final Thoughts Moving Forward:

All of the stakeholders in young children's lives share responsibility for making assessments that are reliable and valid, linguistically responsive and developmentally appropriate. Systematic and sensitive assessments of young children's needs, strengths, and developing progress is central to providing the right experiences and environments to help them grow, learn, and succeed in school.

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<sup>i</sup> Professor David Elkind is currently Professor Emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University. His bibliography numbers close to five hundred items and includes research, theoretical articles, book chapters and eighteen books. A member of many professional organizations, Dr. Elkind is on the Editorial Board of numerous scientific journals, is a consultant to state education departments, as well as to government agencies and private foundations. He lectures extensively in the United States, Canada and abroad. He has appeared on the Today Show, the CBS Morning News, 20/20, Nightline, Donahue, and the Oprah Winfrey Show. He has been profiled in *People* and *Boston Magazine* and was a contributing editor to *Parents Magazine*. Dr. Elkind also co-hosted the Lifetime television series, "Kids These Days". He is a past President of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

<sup>ii</sup> The CAYL Principals Fellowship, established in 2006, creates a learning community for elementary school Principals to strengthen their individual and collective capacity to lead efforts to integrate pre-kindergarten (pre-K) children into their schools and to influence district and state level policies that affect the education of young children. The Fellowship provides an intensive year-long learning experience for promising leaders of elementary schools. To date, 29 Principals have participated in the year-long program that includes quarterly trainings and seminars, site visits, field trips, and distance learning activities.