**WORKSHOP 2**
**Learning from Assessment: Models of Program-Research Partnership in Using Child Outcomes to Improve Practice**

**Chair:** Louisa Banks Tarullo
**Discussant:** Tom Schultz
**Presenters:** Barbara H. Wasik, Gayle Cunningham, Jacqueline Jones

- **A Research Partnership in Action: The Development and Implementation of the LELA, the Language and Emerging Literacy Assessment**
  Barbara H. Wasik

- **Developing and Implementing a Vocabulary Assessment to Guide Instruction**
  Gayle Cunningham

- **Demystifying Assessment for Head Start Educators: Understanding and Using Assessment Data**
  Jacqueline Jones

**Tarullo:** Assessment in early childhood has been defined as "the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting what children do and how they do it as a basis for a variety of educational goals that affect the child…" (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003). The information should contribute to planning for the achievement of learning goals and to communicate progress with care providers and families. Early childhood assessment is intended "to acquire information and understanding that will facilitate the child's development and functional abilities within the family and community" (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000). The process of measuring children's developmental status and progress serves multiple purposes. At the individual child level, assessment information fosters enhancements to a child's learning. In the aggregate, it determines whether an early care and education setting is effective, both for internal and external accountability purposes. In both cases, assessments must be appropriate to the theory of change that underlies program practices, and should provide feedback for continuous improvement of those practices.

Assessment information is only useful when its goals are clearly articulated, its methods carefully implemented, and its results interpreted in the context of other information about the child or setting. Head Start has long emphasized program accountability in the area of child outcomes. Recent key milestones include the Head Start Program Performance Measures Initiative and the launching of the multicohort Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) in 1997, the development of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework in 2000, the funding of the Child Outcomes Research Support Consortium in 2002, and the advent of the Head Start National Reporting System (NRS) in 2003. Model interactive partnerships formed between local Head Start programs and researchers were discussed. They were designed to facilitate the accurate measurement of child progress in multiple domains, and to ensure that the information contributes systematically to improved classroom practice.

The NRS requires assessment of all Head Start children in the year prior to kindergarten using a standardized brief assessment that includes a language screener, assessments of vocabulary, letter knowledge and early math. It is administered by Head Start program staff twice a year, and takes 15 minutes to complete. Programs receive reports back at the overall program or grantee level for baseline results in the fall and growth results in the spring. Data are based on nationally representative samples of programs and extensive qualitative interviews with local staff around the country. To date, 350 assessments have been completed in each of four rounds at 35 Head Start programs.

In response to NRS findings, about 60 percent of programs report changing their practices, with some programs increasing focus on letter naming, literacy skills, counting, and graphing. Some programs had purchased materials that might be help children adjust to test-taking, and a smaller percentage of programs encouraged parents to work on these skills at home. Programs are requesting the results quickly in order to use data in program planning. Once a program understands the assessment results and areas needing improvement, it's important to link programs with existing resources through technical assistance, regional offices, through the internet, and the electronic learning center.

The first presentation focused on a vocabulary assessment as part of a comprehensive language and literacy intervention in an urban Head Start program. The second presentation showcased the development, piloting, refinement, and full program implementation of a language and literacy assessment by a local Head Start program in partnership with university-based researchers. The third presentation depicted a model of systemic classroom-based assessment that is appropriate to multiple domains. Tom Schultz, discussant, is a nationally recognized leader in the fields of preschool curricula, state prekindergarten initiatives, and Head Start child outcomes.

**Wasik:** Learning vocabulary is an important part of early language and literacy development. The Johns Hopkins Language and Literacy Project (JHLLP) is an intensive professional development program and theme-based curriculum that promotes vocabulary development in Head Start children. Currently, 42 Head Start classrooms in Baltimore participate in this project. The curriculum has three main components that support children's language and literacy development: (a) intensive, ongoing staff development; (b) lesson plans and materials; and (c) classroom based assessments related to the curriculum. The curriculum consists of five modules, including oral language, book reading, phonemic awareness, alphabet awareness, and emergent writing. Studies show that children who participated in the JHLLP performed significantly better on measures of expressive and receptive language than children who did not receive the intervention (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006).

As a part of the JHLLP intervention, a program-specific assessment was designed for teachers to evaluate the amount of vocabulary that each child learned during a theme unit. The measure is designed to be flexible so that teachers can assess children on a variety of vocabulary, specifically words presented in the theme units. The assessment is part of a comprehensive language and literacy curriculum that was designed collaboratively with urban Head Start centers and university literacy researchers. Identifying words that children did not learn allows teachers to create opportunities in the classroom to teach unknown words and to tailor instruction for

children who are having difficulty learning words that have been presented during the theme instruction.

The vocabulary assessment is individually administered during center time. The words selected in the assessment are presented frequently during the theme instruction and are also targeted during book reading and center activities. Children are shown objects or object-making actions that represent the vocabulary words. The teachers ask the children to identify the object or the action, (e.g. *hat* or *jumping*) and ask them to state the function of the object or to demonstrate the action. The teacher is able to determine if the child knows the label for the word and understands the meaning of the word. If children do not know words frequently presented in class, the teacher can provide additional opportunities for children to learn the vocabulary words.

Teachers initially reported that they overestimated children's knowledge of words. The assessment allowed them to obtain a more accurate picture of words children had learned and those words with which children were still struggling. Since the assessment is tied to the instruction, the teacher has the opportunity to return to concepts and activities in order to re-teach words that are still unfamiliar to the children.

This vocabulary assessment is an example of a curriculum-based assessment that is used to provide feedback to teachers and to support individualized instruction. It is an example of how dynamic assessment can be used to provide ongoing feedback to teachers and influence teachers' instructional practices. Teachers reported a need to incorporate this activity into their daily routine, with instruction feeding back to the assessment and ultimately back into the curriculum. As a result of this interactive assessment, teachers have created more purposeful opportunities for children to use vocabulary words, they are more explicit with their directions regarding vocabulary, and they interact more with children in terms of conversation asking about the words, using the words, and using props for conceptual understanding.

**Cunningham:** Head Start requires program accountability for children's progress in eight domains: language development, literacy, mathematics, science, creative arts, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and physical health and development. As one local Head Start program assessed its selected child assessment instruments relative to Head Start's increased expectations, it determined that its developmental measure did not adequately assess language and early literacy outcomes. Taking advantage of a decade of partnership with Head Start researchers, program staff developed an instrument that would better assess children's progress in those areas.

As Head Start staff generated potential items for the instrument, research partners provided feedback on the relevance of the items to Head Start requirements. Staff then developed the final draft of the Language and Early Literacy Assessment (LELA).
The LELA includes five scales: Alphabet Recognition, Book Knowledge, Expressive Language, Beginning Sounds, and Phonemic Awareness. The Alphabet Recognition scale includes two templates of upper case and lower case, in random order. The child is asked to point to and name the letters. The Book Knowledge scale has the child answer questions related to a favorite book, identify the front of the book, where to read, letters, words, and so forth. The Expressive Language scale asks the child to retell a story that the teacher has read to him or her several

times. The Beginning Sounds scale assesses how children match beginning sounds. The Phonemic Awareness scale assesses the ability to recognize separate sounds of language, including rhyming and how sounds can be combined, separated, and manipulated.

The instrument was field tested in 2001-2002 on 560 four-year-olds. The research partnership included the administration of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) measures to a subsample of 101 program children. This enabled construct validity to be examined and determined by looking at the relationship between the constructs in the LELA scales and the measures used in the Head Start FACES battery. Internal consistency reliability was also reported for each of the factor scores of the LELA using coefficient alpha. The reliability coefficients for all scales were good, with the alphabet recognition scales having excellent reliability.

The program began using the LELA in its assessment of every Head Start child during the following program year. Assessments are done at the year's beginning, middle, and end. Results of the assessments are used to plan curriculum individualization, and to plan training and development for teaching staff. Results are also shared with parents and kindergarten teachers as children leave Head Start.

The LELA is an effective, easily administered and scored assessment that complements the developmental screening and assessment instruments from commercial sources. It enables staff to develop a comprehensive picture of each child's development, progress, and achievement, and to tailor work with children to achieve optimal outcomes. The LELA, and the research partnership that assisted its development, is another example of the national child development laboratory called Head Start.

**Jones:** Appropriate interpretation and use of assessment data is critical for making effective instructional and programmatic decisions. The increased focus on early childhood education, and the accompanying calls for accountability, have presented early childhood educators with unprecedented amounts of data on child outcomes and program effectiveness. The charge is to cull, from disparate pieces of data, important information that can inform classroom instruction and guide programmatic decision-making. This presentation focuses on a model of systematic classroom-based assessment and outlines major components of an early childhood assessment system that includes appropriate assessments, comprehensive professional development, and sound leadership.

Assessment that is tied directly to classroom instruction has the most promising chance of producing information that can inform instructional effectiveness and lead to successful outcomes for children (Black & William, 1998). Using examples from primary science education, the presentation offers a model for collecting, interpreting, and using evidence of young children's learning. This model offers an assessment framework that can assist teachers as they make effective use of the classroom-based evidence of early learning that can be revealed in records of children's language, drawings, and constructions.

Classroom-based assessment strategies are placed within the larger context of an early childhood assessment system in which multiple types of data are collected and used to answer questions on

such topics as classroom assessment to program evaluation (Jones, 2003). A comprehensive and coherent program of professional development activities is also essential for an effective early childhood assessment system. The professional development program must enhance the assessment-related knowledge and skill of classroom teachers and administrators. An effective assessment system requires educators who can select the most suitable set of instruments, administer them appropriately, and interpret the results to other teachers, parents, school boards, and state departments of education. Examples of successful professional development initiatives are described, including the challenges they face and strategies for effective implementation.

Research suggests that school districts that have been most successful in educating *all* children share some common attributes, particularly leadership that creates a shared vision of success and provides staff with tools to meet that vision (Murphy, 2003; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003).

**Schultz:** Head Start agencies are encountering an increasingly complex and evolving set of policy mandates regarding standards for children's learning and child assessment practices. These requirements impinge on and complicate local program efforts to use child assessment tools and data to improve teaching practices and enhance children's learning.

In the last ten years, Head Start has developed two sets of program outcome standards: the Performance Measures Initiative and the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, and a large-scale child assessment effort, the Head Start National Reporting System. Recent legislative proposals to reauthorize the Head Start Act include additional new provisions for child outcome measures and assessments. During this 10-year time period, 49 states have developed early learning guidelines, 12 states have mandated large-scale assessments for preschool children, and 16 states administer assessments of all children at the beginning of kindergarten (Scott-Little and Martell, 2006). Also, programs receiving federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding to serve young children with disabilities will soon begin new reporting of assessments on three federally mandated child outcomes.

Each of these initiatives transmits a different signal to programs regarding valued child outcome goals, and present different implications for child assessments conducted by local programs. The number and pace of new initiatives generates uncertainty regarding the stability of current policies. Local program managers also question how child assessment information may ultimately be used by federal and state agencies, in particular whether local agencies will be held accountable for child outcome results in the future.

Since many Head Start agencies receive funding from multiple federal and state programs, they grapple with significant challenges in implementing and integrating multiple assessment and outcomes requirements. Head Start teachers and managers are devoting considerable energy to learning new requirements, adjusting existing assessment practices, and responding to new forms of feedback on the progress and accomplishments of children they serve.

The presentations described thoughtful collaborative efforts by local Head Start programs and research partners to develop new child assessment initiatives. The evolution of these initiatives illustrates the challenges of accommodating multiple policy mandates in the standards for

learning and child assessment. For example, the Language and Emerging Literacy Assessment and the vocabulary assessment were developed after inception of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, but prior to implementation of NRS, which requires twice-yearly standardized assessment of all 4- and 5-year-old children in the areas of early literacy, mathematics, and language development. Programs will soon be required to report on additional measures for enrolled children with disabilities, including a generic indicator of cognitive development.

Taken together, this constellation of initiatives reflects a common agenda of strengthening programs through more intensive analysis of evidence of children's progress towards key learning goals. However, the potential to improve program effectiveness depends on equipping personnel at all levels, from classroom teachers to education coordinators, and local, state and federal program managers with the skills, knowledge and time to understand, interpret, and apply the implications of multiple forms of child assessment data. In that regard, Jones's presentation on a system of professional development on child assessment issues is timely and significant.