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Exploring the Knowledge Gap in Early Childhood Assessment

Daniel J. Cichoracki

Eastern Michigan University, dcichoracki@gmail.com

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EXPLORING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT

By

Daniel Cichoracki

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Abstract

Assessment in early childhood focuses on authentic experiences with trained adults guiding the children in learning experiences. Using research and guided by best practices, early childhood professionals implement a variety of assessment tools to identify children who may be in need of testing for developmental or other delays and to guide their classroom practice. This exploratory study identified the practical implementation of assessment tools in early childhood education to identify any gap between research and implementation with the goal of aiding future assessment research and development to reflect the needs of early childhood professionals more accurately. Despite having a small sample size the study provided evidence to support continued work with a more precise instrument over a larger sample of the population.

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Exploring the Knowledge Gap in Early Childhood Assessment

The word 'assessment' represents a variety of actions as diverse as formal, standardized educational testing, an annual performance review, a patient's medical diagnosis, and a real estate appraisal; these are all methods of assessing different things. While each of these assessments provides a different result, there are standard similarities in their functions. A real estate appraisal uses the recent selling price of nearby real estate to determine the comparative value of a property. A medical diagnosis evaluates a patient's health by comparing an individual patient to benchmarks of a healthy person, to determine what symptoms are present and aid in diagnosis of an ailment. An employee receiving an annual performance review will have individual performance compared to benchmarks of expected qualities and qualifications. Likewise, criterion-referenced standardized testing compares individual performance to a learning standard to show individual understanding. Although they examine different subjects, each of these assessments is similar inasmuch as they each compare the results of an individual or of a single item to a standard or benchmark in order to make a determination of quality, value, health or learning.

Additionally, results from these assessments are easily quantifiable; one can quickly examine a list of real estate sales to determine property value for a neighborhood or city and a list of symptoms can be compiled from one patient to identify similarities with a second patient. Likewise, similarities and differences in the results of an educational assessment can be compared to identify which items were frequently answered correctly and which were most frequently answered incorrectly, as a means for the teacher to better understand what skills need reinforcing and which appear to have

been mastered. Collecting appropriate data, then, is paramount to a valid assessment. Older students are more likely to be literate and, as such, are assessed using written methods that require an individual to respond to a series of items to provide evidence of conceptual understanding. One of the key differences in early childhood assessment is that the subjects do not yet have the requisite literacy skills to complete a written assessment independently. This does not mean that early childhood education programs are exempt from assessment; it only indicates the need for a different form of assessment tool.

Assessment tools in early childhood provide a level of accountability as well as providing an adult-administered tool that a child understands and substantiates a teacher's claims of growth and understanding. Some early childhood assessment tools rely upon teacher and parent observations to provide evidence of a child's growth and development over a period of time (Downs & Strand, 2006). These observation-based assessment tools provide the backbone of early childhood assessment, ensuring authentic opportunities for a teacher to determine a child's abilities and measure growth (MacDonald, 2007). Screening tools, or screeners, identify children who need further evaluation (Sosna & Mastergeorge, 2005). Screeners typically require an adult to complete a brief questionnaire related to the focus of the tool. They may also require the subject's input, as in the case of a hearing screening, when the subject is asked to raise one hand or the other based on when and where a tone is recognized.

These two types of tools serve distinct purposes and are important to gaining insight into a child's development. A screening tool, designed to identify children who may need further evaluation, may be a routine beginning of the year experience or

implemented as needed to address concerns about an individual child at a specific point in the year, whereas an assessment tool is useful to identify growth towards specific learning goals as they are addressed. When used together, as research suggests, these tools allow teachers and parents to work together and address the needs of each child appropriately, identifying any special needs as well as providing ongoing assessment data (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998).

Literature Review

Although early childhood assessment differs from other educational assessments, specifically in the lack of a written form completed by the subject, the same criteria apply for selecting one assessment tool over another, including validity, ease of administration, inclusion of appropriate content, and reliability (Dichtelmiller, 2011). Since young children cannot yet read or write with the requisite skills to complete a standardized written assessment, publishers of early childhood assessments create adult-administered assessment tools. These tools may require an adult to complete a questionnaire or to conduct observations to measure the growth of an individual child in the program.

The lack of literacy and writing skills in young children only accounts for part of the decision to exclude them from formal standardized testing. There is also concern for the stress levels caused by test anxiety, even in the early years. A 1998 study indicated that, even in lower elementary grades, teachers are concerned about the stress that formalized assessments can put on a child (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998). In addition to teachers' attitudes and concerns about stress, the increased push for accountability has been suggested to increase pressure on children and teachers alike, both of whom have more to lose from low assessment scores (Hatch, 2002).

These concerns, and others, have encouraged the use of authentic assessments in early childhood, that is, assessment tasks that are a part of everyday activity and not assessment tasks designed solely to serve the purpose of assessment (Dunphy, 2010). A key benefit to authentic assessment methods is that they ask children to complete a familiar task with familiar adults to measure the child's responses to stimuli in a more controlled, natural setting (Downs & Strand, 2006). Authentic assessment serves as a means to allow a child a better opportunity to perform as naturally and comfortably as possible by removing unfamiliar situations and people from the assessment experience; thereby diminishing the test anxiety the child may otherwise have felt.

A survey of pre-kindergarten through fourth grade teachers showed that nearly 90% use a variety of assessment methods, including portfolios, checklists, and observations, to supplement commercial pencil-and-paper tests; and the majority of these tools are self-created (McNair, Bhargava, Adams, Edgerton, & Kypros, 2003). The benefits listed above and teacher preference for authentic assessment methods suggests that early childhood teachers are aware of the need for accountability in their profession and, they unanimously believe these authentic assessments are valid forms of identifying a child's growth and needs (McNair, et al., 2003).

This study was designed to explore a distinction between theoretical research knowledge and practical knowledge within the context of early childhood assessment practices. Because screening and assessment tools are designed to suit specific purposes, research indicates the need for using both in early childhood education programs to provide valid identification and evaluation of the needs and development of children.

Method

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the nature of assessment in early childhood education programs in order to determine if there currently exists a gap between research knowledge about assessment and implementation of assessment in early childhood classrooms. While this subject is not unique, this survey approach is somewhat different in that it examines the needs of early childhood educators as opposed to serving the primary function of advancing the needs of assessment research and development. The secondary purpose for the study was to examine the attitudes and needs of early childhood professionals toward professional development and enrichment activities that are required for continued licensing and certification.

This secondary purpose came about because of a partnership with the MiAEYC. As a professional organization, the MiAEYC holds an interest not only in identifying trends in assessment use, but also in determining key factors that impact individual decisions to attend, or to forego, professional development opportunities. This will aid in planning future activities, providing a list of topics that resonate with a group of people and identifying geographic areas where a professional development activity may have higher attendance.

Population

This survey was intended to reach early childhood education centers located within the state of Michigan. In order to ease the burden of distributing the survey, it was distributed through a partnership with the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children (MiAEYC), the state-level affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a professional organization dedicated to promoting early childhood education and advocating on the behalf of young children.

This distribution partnership provided an estimated population of 5,000 current and active MiAEYC members. This total is misleading, however, as the study was designed to examine specific early childhood education centers as the unit of analysis, not individual teachers. The survey was administered online using Survey Mönkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/68HYCNF>), and the link was distributed through several regular MiAEYC electronic newsletters and member updates between the months of October and December 2011. Responses were collected from October 2011 through February 2012.

The survey received 223 total responses. Nineteen responses were eliminated because they were identified as duplicate responses received from employees of the same early childhood program, less complete than needed, or otherwise invalid, which left a final sample size of 204. The responses come from a variety of early childhood programs: public programs, programs affiliated with public school districts, private programs, for-profit programs; independent programs, and programs that exist as part of corporations or as subsidiaries thereof. Responses also include a sampling of nearly every county in the state of Michigan, including several programs located in the Upper Peninsula.

Survey Instrument

Since this was an exploratory study, and to better fit the schedules of early childhood professionals, this survey can be completed in less than ten minutes. Each of the ten items was selected for its value to this study as well as to aid in the design of further research into the topic. The first question provides researchers with general program data, including program name, address, city and ZIP code. This item also asks respondents to indicate whether the program represented has accreditation through the

NAEYC or if they receive federal Head Start funds or State of Michigan Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) funds.

- **NAEYC Accreditation:** The NAEYC provides a national, voluntary accreditation program that quickly identifies high quality early childhood programs (NAEYC, 2013). This is one of several national accreditation services and is possibly the most readily recognized accreditation body in the field of early childhood education.
- **Head Start:** Head Start is a federally funded early childhood program that promotes school readiness from birth through age five for very low-income families (Office of Head Start, 2013).
- **Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP):** The GSRP is a state-funded early childhood program that provides funding to early childhood educational programs that provide preschool services for children who are at risk, as determined by GSRP program guidelines (Michigan Department of Education, 2013).

The second survey item provides information about program size and ages of the enrolled children. Not only does this provide general data about enrollment, but also the ages of children attending a program may influence assessment and screening decisions. A program that exclusively enrolls infants and toddlers, for instance, will use different screening tools than a program that enrolls children in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten. Additionally, a smaller program may have a lower assessment budget and, likewise, implement a narrower selection of tools than a larger program.

The third question identifies specific assessment and screening tools used in each program. This item is used to identify the frequency with which each tool is

implemented, the type of programs using each tool, and how frequently specific tools of each type, assessment and screening, are used in conjunction with one another in a single program. Head Start, GSRP and NAEYC accreditation programs have specific regulations governing assessment and screening of children as a part of program participation requirements. Head Start, for instance, sets forth specific requirements, however, each program still has a variety of choices in assessment tools (Schultz, 2000).

Item four provides the number of times per year that teachers meet with parents to share the results of ongoing observation-based assessments as well as screening tools. While there are specific standards for reporting these findings, some programs, especially those that are part of a school district, may align their conference schedules to match the district's schedule, while others may choose to meet more or less frequently based on program needs.

Item five identifies the uses for assessment data, including impact on planning, assessing a child for specific needs, assessment data collected to meet licensing requirements, and sharing growth and development information with parents and future teachers. This allows future teachers to plan instruction to meet the needs and abilities of incoming children as well as providing documentation required for programs that provide services for children with special needs. This item allowed respondents to write in their own responses as well as allowing them to select multiple responses.

Item six asks for the frequency with which teachers plan for their classrooms. Planning needs are often program- or classroom-dependent, that is program requirements or factors in each classroom will determine the teacher's planning schedule. A teacher who implements the Project approach, for instance, may only complete full planning

activities at the end of a month-long project, whereas a teacher who implements a weekly discovery planning approach will complete planning activities on a weekly basis.

The second part of the survey dealt with professional development. As with other teaching specialties, early childhood education professionals are required to participate in professional development activities to maintain their teaching certification as well as to remain abreast of new research and strategies to implement in their classrooms. Item seven addresses the funding source for early childhood professional development opportunities: whether the center provides funding for its staff, if staff members are required to pay their own professional development fees, or whether a center receives money from an outside source, such as grants or scholarship funding, to cover these expenses.

Item eight identifies existing types of professional development opportunities and determines attendance numbers for each type. This item can be used to identify the importance of location, sponsor, or other factors that may make one specific opportunity more desirable to attend than another.

Item nine asks for specific training opportunities sought by early childhood professionals; those topics upon which professionals seek to improve their skills and those that may be in high enough demand that training opportunities should be organized.

Finally, item ten identifies several reasons that early childhood professionals do not attend development opportunities. Respondents were allowed to select three reasons for this item, providing 489 responses across the 204 respondents. These final three items provide guidance for planning future professional development opportunities, allowing

organizers to plan opportunities that are more relevant and to host them in the region where they may provide the necessary information to the largest audience possible.

Plan for Analysis

Program-specific address data was used to verify the integrity of the data, ensuring that each responding program provides only one unique set of responses across the sample. After stripping data of program-specific location information, all valid ZIP codes were compiled and mapped using the Batch Geo online service (<http://www.batchgeo.com>). After this, each response was issued a unique identifier to maintain anonymity.

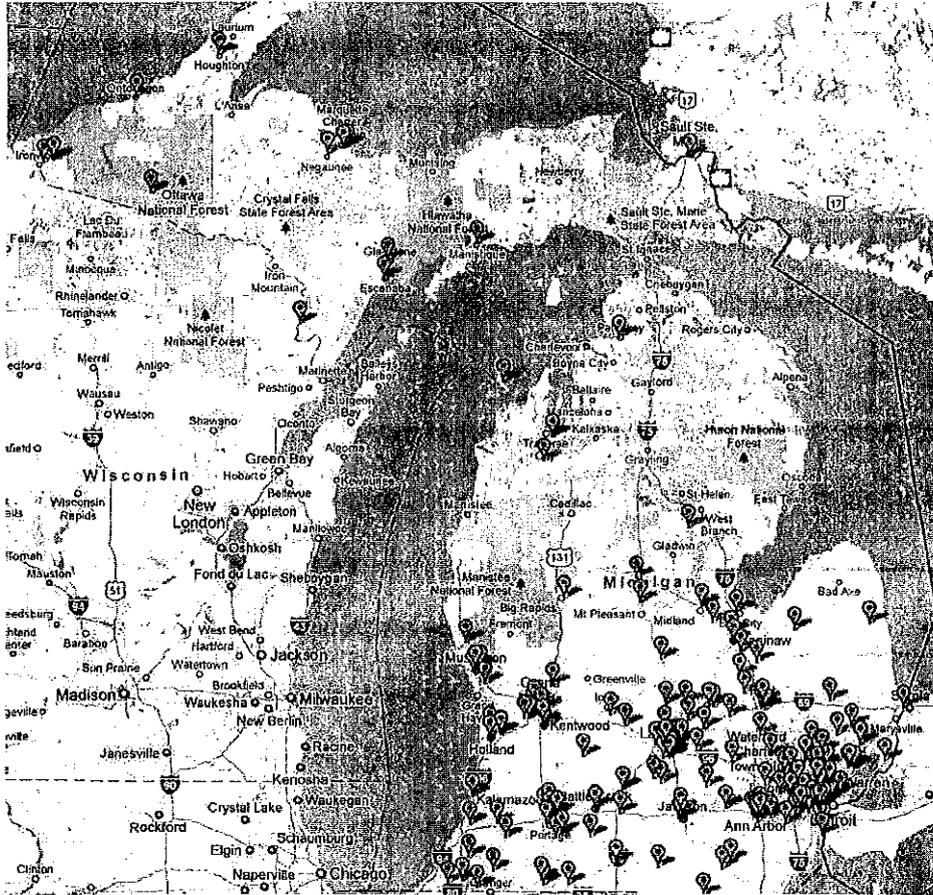
The original data analysis design was to create subsets of programs as being Head Start, GSRP, or NAEYC accredited or not. These subsamples would be used to provide comparative analysis of trends in assessment and screening use among, and between, each category. Due to the small sample size, these subsamples were considered too small to provide effective, reliable results from data analysis and the data was analyzed using the entire data set.

Results

Location

As **Error! Reference source not found.** shows, this study represents the majority of regions throughout the state, including the Upper Peninsula. These geographically diverse programs represent both large, urban population centers and smaller, rural programs.

Figure 1
Survey Response Map



Center Accreditation and Funding Program Eligibility

Of the 204 responses, only 33 programs indicate that they are NAEYC Accredited while 101 receive GSRP funding and 41 receive Head Start funding (See

Table 1

Program Accreditation and Funding). It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive; a program that receives federal Head Start funds can also receive state GSRP funds and it can be NAEYC Accredited, or any other

combination of these categories. In this study, eight programs are NAEYC Accredited programs that receive Head Start funding grants; fourteen programs are NAEYC Accredited and receive GSRP funding grants; and four are NAEYC Accredited programs that receive both Head Start and/GSRP funding grants.

Table 1

Program Accreditation and Funding

NAEYC ACCREDITED	GREAT START (GSRP)	HEAD START
33	101	41

Enrollment

As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondent programs serve the needs of older preschool and pre-kindergarten children.

Table 2

Age Range and Program Enrollment

AGE RANGE	# OF PROGRAMS
0-6 Months	60
6-12 Months	64
12-18 Months	73
18-30 Months	80
2.5-5 Years	192

Kindergarten	54
School Age	22

Assessments in Use

The most frequently implemented tools in this study are the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) with 99 programs (49%) implementing the screening tool and the Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum, with 89 programs (44%) implementing the curriculum and assessment program. The most frequently used curriculum-specific assessment tool is the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), with 29 programs (15%) implementing. Table 3

Assessment and Screening Tools in Use shows the four most frequently implemented assessment and screening tools according to responses. The complete table is included in Appendix B.

Table 3

Assessment and Screening Tools in Use

Developmental Screenings	Total	Developmental Assessments	Total	Curriculum-Specific Assessments	Total
Ages and Stages	99	Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum	89	Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)	29
Brigance	42	High/Scope Child	57	Michigan Literacy	11

		Observation Record		Progress Profile (MLPP)	
Early Screening	26	Work Sampling	36	Dynamic	11
Inventory -- Revised (ESI-R)		System		Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS)	
Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning-4 (DIAL-4)	11	Self-Made	12	Early Literacy Scales Assessment (ELSA)	7

Frequency of Parent Teacher Conferences and Reporting Activities

Of the total responses (n=204), only 199 indicated the frequency of parent teacher conferences. Ten programs, or 5%, hold parent teacher conferences once per academic year; 57 programs, or 28%, hold conferences twice per academic year; 70 programs, or 34%, hold conferences three times per academic year; and 60 programs, or 29%, hold conferences four times per academic year. Two programs, or 1%, hold conferences five or more times per academic year.

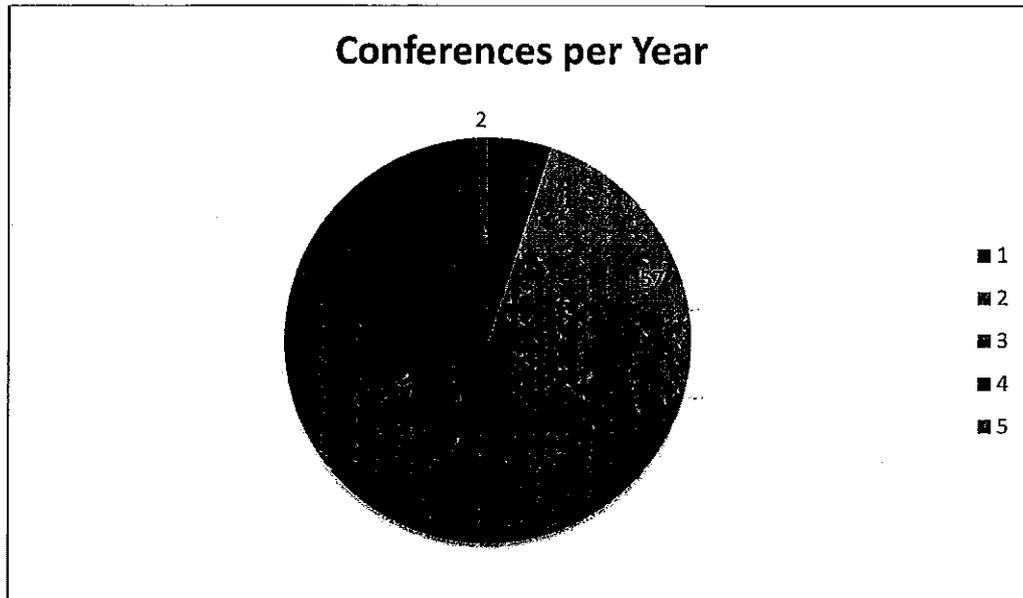


Figure 2 Conferences Held Each Year

Use of Assessment Data

Since this item allows respondents to select more than one response, several programs have overlap in responses and the total number of responses accepted for this item is 683 from the sample size of 204. The most frequent use of assessment data is to provide parents with feedback at conferences (193 responses, 28%); the second most frequent use is to adjust planning (176 responses, 26%); and the third most frequent use is for needs assessment (156 responses, 23%). The complete table for this item is located in Appendix C.

Table 4

Assessment Use

Response	Total
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To give feedback to parents at conferences	193
To adjust planning	176
For needs assessment	156
To share information with future teacher(s)	107
For licensing requirements	52
To train new teachers	3
Grant writing	2
To evaluate teacher performance	1

Frequency of planning

Nearly 50 percent of programs, across each age group cohort, report planning on a weekly basis, with only ten programs indicating that planning is done less than once every month.

Table 5

Frequency of Planning

Age Range	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
0-6 months	22	35	13
6-12 months	25	36	14
12-18 months	30	36	14
18-30 months	32	44	14
2.5-5 years	82	120	26

Paying for Professional Development Opportunities

Of the 204 responses to this study, 176 programs (86%) indicated that they provide funding assistance for staff members to attend professional development and training. Seventeen programs (8%) indicated receipt of partial funding through grants or other outside sources and another 18 (8%) programs identified that they require staff members to pay their own professional development fees. Only 8 programs (4%) indicate that no funding is provided for training. The difference between respondents and total number of responses for this question is due to multiple responses by individual programs. Some programs, for instance, only paid for required training, such as CPR, and each staff member is responsible for paying individual fees for additional training.

Types of Professional Development Opportunities Attended

Professional development opportunities come in a variety of formats, depending upon the needs of both the facilitators and participants. Responses to this item, shown in

Table 6

Professional Development Activity Participation, indicate that the three most attended forms of professional development are training opportunities that are organized and held locally (162 responses), in-service trainings (160 responses), and local conferences (139 responses).

Table 6

Professional Development Activity Participation

Type of Professional Development Opportunity	Attendees
Local/Regional training	162
In-service	160

Local/Regional conferences	139
Reading early childhood magazines and other related publications	128
College or University courses	119
MIAEYC conferences or institutes	117
Online training	117
Local AEYC conference or activities	83
NAEYC conference	56
Participation in online childcare communities and/or forums	41

Professional Development Opportunities Sought

Areas of topical concern for early childhood professionals, as indicated in Table 7

Professional Development: Topical Interest include problem or difficult behavior (161 responses), curriculum specific training (140 responses), and special needs and inclusion (129 responses). Complete results for this item are included in Appendix D.

Table 7

Professional Development: Topical Interest

Training Topic	Responses
Handling problem behavior or difficult children	161
Curriculum-specific training	140
Special needs or inclusion	129
New activities and projects	117

Information on current and upcoming policy changes	99
Community building strategies	85
Licensing requirements	72
Enrollment and retention strategies	44
Child safety	42

Reasons for Not Attending Professional Development Opportunities

The most frequently occurring concerns, 286 of the 489 responses to this item or 59%, cited funding concerns as barriers to attending professional development and training opportunities. Eighty-eight programs (18%) indicated that the center has limited funds to pay for staff training; 77 programs (16%) identified difficulties in hiring substitutes to cover scheduled work shifts; 74 programs (15%) expressed concerns over the expense of training and 47 programs (10%) said they could not afford to give staff members the time off to attend training. Sixty-eight programs (14%) indicated location as a top concern when deciding whether to attend a training opportunity and 46 programs (9%) said that training opportunities were thought to be too basic for individual or program needs. Complete results for this item are included in Appendix E.

Discussion

This section provides a sequential discussion of each item on the survey.

Items 1 and 2: Location, Center Accreditation and Enrollment

The primary purpose of collecting demographic data was to provide a basis for comparison between similar programs, such as two rural Head Start programs or two Urban GSRP programs. The location of each respondent verified that, even with such a

small sample size, a geographically diverse subset of Michigan early childhood programs was collected. Identifying programs who are NAEYC Accredited or that receive either federal Head Start or state GSRP funding provides three distinct subsets that could be analyzed for similarities and consistencies in a follow-up study. Two of these categories, NAEYC Accreditation and Head Start funding will also be of further use when compared to programs throughout the country.

The ages of children enrolled and, through these responses, sizes of programs responding indicate that the survey reached a majority of preschool programs enrolling 2.5 – 5 year old children. The numbers of programs responding that indicate they enroll infants from 0 – 6 months is higher than anticipated as this age group has the highest total cost per enrolled child due to licensing and staffing requirements. It does appear consistent with other age groups, however, because a program that enrolls infants would likely intend to retain enrollment beyond the six month age cut-off and into preschool. The increase of respondents indicating enrollment of 18 – 30 month old children corresponds with State of Michigan licensing requirements that decrease the caregiver to child ratio within each classroom (State of Michigan Department of Human Services, 2008). Note that this is not being given as an official reason for these numbers; it is simply included as a means to identify the potential validity of responses.

Item 3: Assessments in Use

As written, the survey included a list of nineteen assessment and screening tools to choose from, with the additional opportunity for write-in responses. Including every write-in response, the study identified a total of 56 unique assessment and screening tools. The nineteen selections provided were considered representative of the anticipated

response items. Including these write-in responses, however, 36 selections received only one response indicating that the specific tool was implemented only in one program. This means that, while the original assertion that the nineteen tools originally identified was inaccurate, the inaccuracy is not due to research oversight because, as anticipated, the majority of responses fell within the results listed in Table 3

Assessment and Screening Tools in Use. These 12 responses represent 84% of all responses received for this item. This indicates that, while there is great variance and opportunity within each program to select assessment materials, the majority of programs are using the same methods and tools.

For the purposes of this study, developmental assessments and curriculum-specific assessments were differentiated to reflect the differences in their implementation. A curriculum-specific assessment, such as the Michigan Literacy Progress Profile (MLPP), is administered to determine a child's specific literacy development and reading ability. The MLPP and other curriculum-specific assessments are similar to screening tools inasmuch as they often measure a single aspect of development as opposed to a broad range of development. However, they differ in that the curriculum-specific tool only seeks to identify a child's ability level and not to identify the need for further assessment. Developmental assessments typically provide a greater depth of understanding of a child's abilities.

While a comprehensive list of tools, such as the one compiled by the California Institute for Mental Health, in 2005 (Sosna & Mastergeorge, 2005), may suggest that there is market saturation for early childhood growth and observation tools, this may not necessarily be the case. Due to the variance in individual child development, for instance,

a single tool may not provide an adequate range of skills and benchmarks for comparison. Additionally, in order to reflect the growing and changing research base in the field, maintaining an up-to-date tool is vital as an outdated system may omit recent findings that will influence the validity of the findings.

Item 4: Frequency of Parent Teacher Conferences and Reporting Activities

Currently, there are varieties of standards delegating intervals between conferences, some of which are determined by the assessment tool, others by licensing requirements. This means that each program may be required to hold these conferences at different time intervals, some may hold monthly conferences, while others may hold one conference that corresponds to the marking period and conference schedule for primary and secondary schools in the district.

Over 60% of all responding programs indicate that they conduct parent teacher conferences or other assessment reporting activities three or four times in an academic year. These responses indicate that the majority of respondents are meeting to report assessment findings more than at the start and end of the year and roughly one quarter of all respondents hold conferences only twice a year.

Item 5: Use of Assessment Data

The most commonly accepted purposes for assessment in early childhood programs are: (1) to use classroom performance to guide instruction; (2) for identification of health or other special needs; (3) to monitor trends and evaluate programs and services; (4) and for high stakes accountability (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998). The responses provided were selected to reflect these uses and respondents were allowed to provide additional responses. From the 39 write-in responses, only three, training new

teachers, grant writing, and evaluating teacher performance indicated a use for assessment data other than the five provided. Additionally, two programs identified that they do not use assessment data at all.

As expected, the most frequently reported purpose of assessment is to share information with families in conferences. The four selections with the lowest frequencies of responses—licensing, training new teachers, and evaluating teacher performance—lie outside the assessment use indicators reported by Shepard, Kagan & Wurtz (1998). Of these responses, licensing requirements lies beyond the scope of influence of an individual program; that is, the program is not able to change these requirements, but is bound to abide by them in order to retain licensure. These responses are expected results inasmuch as a program will possibly select a specific assessment tool in order to meet those licensing requirements. An unexpected concern for assessment practice is that some programs identify their sole use of assessment information as meeting licensing requirements or other less widely accepted responses.

The total numbers of responses indicating needs assessment as a common use may be indicative of an increased focus on early recognition and intervention at younger ages. Recognizing that a child needs additional learning and developmental support allows teachers at all levels to better meet the child's needs by implementing early intervention strategies.

Item 6: Frequency of Planning

Item 6 provides a rudimentary examination of program planning. Planning frequency is a result of the needs of each program and age group. A program that employs a project approach, that is, an in-depth examination of a specific topic over a

period of weeks, months, up to a full year, may only plan at each stage of a project, and will not need to plan on a more frequent basis. Likewise, when planning activities for an infant room, a teacher may choose to maintain consistent activities over a longer period, instead of planning activities that differ on a weekly basis.

Item 7: Paying for Professional Development Opportunities

These results indicate that, while the importance of professional development opportunities is recognized, the amount of funding a center will provide for staff to participate in professional development opportunities varies. The majority of respondents indicated that the early childhood education program funds some, if not all, of the costs associated with these trainings. Additionally, several respondents indicated that they provide partial funding for these opportunities and, even then, only when enrollment is high enough to justify the expense in the budget, while others report that they cover only the biannual CPR course requirements.

Item 8: Types of Professional Development Opportunities Attended

Training opportunities vary from national level conferences to online training, especially when training staff in curriculum and assessment tools. The top three types of professional development attended are local or regional training and conferences, followed by in-service trainings, those held within a specific early childhood education centers. The proximity and ease of attending a professional development opportunity seems to hold as much weight as the topic of the presentation when considering whether it can be attended. Offering a popular professional development opportunity in Metropolitan Detroit, for instance, may be appealing due to the population density, but a

program operating out of Traverse City may not wish to send attendees due to the travel time and expenses.

Two of these responses, online training and online community and forum participation, indicate the changing nature of training needs. These two response categories combined account for 158 (15%) of the total responses, which puts the online opportunity in a secure location, behind only local training and in-service training opportunities. This indicates a potentially untapped opportunity. With such a large number of early childhood professionals already participating in online training and experiences, the potential success of online seminars may merit further investigation.

Item 9: Professional Development Opportunities Sought

Simply offering training opportunities is not enough to guarantee that anyone will attend. The training topics have to address issues that early childhood professionals feel are relevant or cover specific skills they want to focus on developing and, as seen in the responses to item ten, these training opportunities have to be offered within proximity to the interested programs. This item serves to identify those highly relevant topics in order to better plan training options.

The areas with the highest reported training needs are handling difficult behaviors and curriculum-specific training. These two areas encompass a broad range of teacher concerns. A child who displays unruly or undesirable behavior can take up more of the teacher's time than is desired which, in turn, takes away from the time the teacher can spend engaged in other critical activities. Having a better understanding of curricular and assessment practices provides a teacher with a better working knowledge of the professional requirements of the job.

Item 10: Reasons for not Attending Professional Development Opportunities

By a narrow margin, the number one concern reported by respondents is lack of funding. This, however, can appear misleading until limitations set forth by other responses are taken into consideration. Four of the top five responses listed, limited funds, difficulty in covering shifts for employees' missed workdays, personal expense to attend, and inability to give staff time off from work. These four response categories account for 286 of the 489 total responses, or 59%. Each of these categories speaks, albeit to different degrees, to funding concerns in early childhood education programs.

Analysis of the Knowledge Gap

The central question of this study is whether a gap exists between research and practice in early childhood assessment. In order to determine this, responses from item 3 were placed into the following three categories: (1) Screening tools, (2) Developmental assessments and (3) Curriculum-specific assessments. This study examined the first two categories, screening tools and developmental assessments, to determine if a specific program meets the research ideals of assessment. Sixty-eight programs, or 1/3 of responses, indicate that they are not using a combination of at least a single screening and assessment tool.

While this number is significant to the study, it only suggests that there may be a gap between how research indicates an early childhood program conducts assessments and the practical implementation of assessments in early childhood education programs.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

The biggest limiting factor of this study is the small sample size. While the number of early childhood education programs in the state is difficult to determine, a search on NAEYC accredited programs within 50 miles of Ypsilanti, MI returned 78 programs, which indicates a sizable population compared to this study, which has a sample size of 204. A larger sample size could show more explicit connections and trends between screenings and assessments across the entire state. This larger sample size could be used as a basis to suggest further work in this area, possibly expanding to a regional or national study.

The second limitation to this study was the distribution method. Although the survey was distributed to approximately 5,000 MiAEYC members, the actual population of early childhood programs was not identified and several responses were received representative of a single program. Additionally, membership in the MiAEYC is not mandatory for an early childhood program or educator and this distribution method excluded those programs whose employees are not members. Finally, in order to secure the MiAEYC distribution partnership, we agreed to survey the population on a second topic, professional development opportunities.

Even though the distribution method provided several limitations, it also provided a key benefit in the ease of distribution. Without a budget and with a limited response window, for instance, it would have been difficult or impossible to obtain a sample of any significant size. While the majority of programs could have been identified using phone books or searching the internet, this would have been a time consuming endeavor and

smaller programs, such as those run from within a private residence, may have been omitted.

A third limitation is in the dual focus of this study. Increasing the number of items focusing on assessment use and practice from six to ten questions will provide a greater depth of understanding, providing follow-up questions to determine assessment and screening tools used with each age range, for instance, or allowing respondents to provide the rationale for selecting one tool over another.

Another limitation of this study is the precision of wording required to elicit the desired response to each item. A problem in word choice for item four, "How often do teachers engage in child assessment activities?" led several respondents to reiterate their use of an ongoing observation-based assessment method. As indicated above, this was not the intended purpose for the item; the focus was to determine the frequency of conference and reporting activities throughout the year. Fortunately, the majority of respondents provided the desired information or indicated they recognized the difference between the wording used and the desired response to the item.

The final factor influencing results is in federal Head Start requirements for home visits and conferences. Head Start requires a minimum of two home visits and two parent/teacher conferences per year. Great Start Readiness Programs are required to have a minimum of four family contacts, suggesting the same formula of two at-home visits and two parent-teacher conferences in an academic year. While a home visit differs from a parent-teacher conference in several ways, this study did not differentiate between these two types of family contact.

Future Directions

In order to pursue further work with this study, two steps are required to adjust for the majority of concerns in its design. The first step is to deconstruct the study to reflect only the primary purpose, examining assessment practices. While the limitations were considered acceptable for this brief exploratory study, a larger study would provide a better opportunity to question programs that were not represented due to the somewhat exclusive nature of the distribution list.

The second step in planning for future work is to correct the semantic problems with survey items. In order to provide explicit direction for responses, word selection has to be corrected to reflect the intention of each item accurately. These clarifications will provide a greater degree of accuracy in responses as programs will be less prone to confusion in responding.

The percentage of responses to this study indicating concerns over assessment use support further work in order to validate and examine response data with a larger sample size. After adjusting the survey tool accordingly, then, future work could entail a more thorough study of Michigan programs, obtaining a larger sample size within the state. Analysis of this state-level data would determine the feasibility of implementing the study in a broader region. Because regulations governing early childhood education programs differ from state to state, each state selected will require additional research to determine requirements and regulations before designing the instrument to be used in that specific state.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable insight into the nature of assessment practices. The increasing importance of assessment-driven accountability

emphasizes the need to design assessments that account for the needs and practices of those who conduct assessments while maintaining research-supported best practices.

While there may not be a set of absolute standards to guide assessment, continued work on this study can provide a strong comparison between these two aspects of assessment, resulting in assessment tools and methods that serve the classroom needs of teachers while maintaining high standards in their design.

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Appendix A
Complete Survey Instrument

1. Please provide the following information:

Program Name:

Address:

Address 2:

City/Town:

ZIP:

Is your Center NAEYC accredited? ('yes' or 'no')

Is your Center a Head Start Program? ('yes' or 'no')

Is your Center a GSRP Program? ('yes' or 'no')

What is your role or position at the Center?

2. What ages of children are enrolled in your program? Select an option for each age group that indicates the number of children enrolled in your program for that specific age group. (Item was originally provided as a series of drop-down boxes)

The following options were provided for each of the following age ranges: Birth – 6 months; 6 – 12 months; 12 – 18 months; 18 – 30 months; 2.5 – 5 years; and Kindergarten.

Not Applicable/We do not enroll this age group

1 – 9

10 – 19

20 – 19

30+

3. What type of child assessment(s) are used in your program? (Check all that apply)

Brief Infant/Toddler Social and Emotional Scale (BITSEA)

Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ)

Test of Early Reading Abilities 3 (TERA-3)

The Ounce Scale

Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum

Test of Early Mathematics Ability 2nd Edition (TEMA-2)

Brigance Screens

Denver Developmental Screening Test (DDST)

Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning-4 (DIAL-4)

Early Screening Inventory- Revised (ESI-R)

Battelle Developmental Inventory

High/Scope Child Observation Record

Galileo System

Work Sampling System

Child Behavior Checklist V/2 - 5 (CBCL)

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills 6th Edition (DIBELS)

Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)

Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (ITSEA)

Early Literacy Scales Assessment (ELSA)

Other:

4. How often do teachers engage in child assessment activities?

1 time per year

2 times per year

3 times per year

4 times per year

More than 4 times per year (Please specify):

5. How are these assessments used?

To give feedback to parents at conferences

For needs assessment

To share information with kindergarten teachers

To adjust planning

For licensing requirements

Other (please specify)

6. How frequently is planning done in your center? Select one answer for each age group.

The following options were provided for each of the following age ranges: Birth – 6 months; 6 – 12 months; 12 – 18 months; 18 – 30 months; 2.5 – 5 years; and Kindergarten.

Not Applicable/We don't enroll this age group

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Every 2 months

Every 3 months

Every 4 months

Every 6 months

Once a year

7. Does your center set aside money to aide in professional development and training?

Yes

No

We receive funding from an outside source to pay for staff development.

Staff members are expected to pay their own fees for development and training.

Other (please specify)

8. What types of professional development and training does your staff participate?

Check all that apply.

NAEYC conference

MIAEYC conferences or institutes

Local AEYC conference or activities

In-service (someone comes in to your Center to conduct training)

Online training

Local/Regional training

Local/Regional conferences

College or University courses

Reading early childhood magazines and other related publications

Participation in online childcare communities and/or forums

9. What professional development topics do you think your staff would most benefit from?

Information on current and upcoming policy changes

Licensing requirements

New activities and projects

Special needs or inclusion

Enrollment and retention strategies

Handling problem behavior or difficult children

Curriculum-specific training

Child safety

Community building strategies

Other (Please specify)

10. What are some of the reasons your staff may not participate in professional development opportunities? Select three.

Trainings are too expensive for individual staff members.

Trainings are not offered locally.

Can't afford to give staff time off.

Center has limited funds.

Difficult to cover shifts of employees in training.

Unaware of training opportunities.

Staff already receives sufficient training.

Training offered is too basic.

Not enough advance notice given for training.

We can only afford or require the training needed for licensing.

Appendix B
Assessment and Screening Tools in Use: Detailed Data Table

Tool Name	Responses
Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ)	99
Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum	89
High/Scope Child Observation Record	57
Brigance Screens	42
Work Sampling System	36
Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)	29
Early Screening Inventory-Revised (ESI-R)	26
Self-Made	12
Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning-4 (DIAL-4)	11
Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills 6th Edition (DIBELS)	11
Michigan Literacy Progress Profile (MLPP)	11
Battelle Developmental Inventory	10
Denver Developmental Screening Test (DDST)	8
Assessment, Evaluation, Programing System for Infants and Children (AEPS)	8
Early Literacy Scales Assessment (ELSA)	7
Infant Toddler Developmental Assessment (IDA)	5
Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP)	4
Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (IFSEA)	3

None	3
Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDI)	3
Child Behavior Checklist 1½ - 5 (CBCL)	2
ARTIC	2
Hayes	2
Brief Infant/Toddler Social and Emotional Scale (BITSEA)	1
Galileo System	1
Test of Early Reading Abilities 3 (TERA-3)	1
Test of Early Mathematics Ability 2nd Edition (TEMA-2)	1
Psycho Educational Profile – 3 (PEP-3)	1
Learning Accomplishment Profile (LAP)	1
LID	1
SID	1
Carolina Curriculum for Preschoolers with Special Needs	1
Reggio documentation	1
Lollipop test	1
Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO)	1
6 Simple To Assess Young Children	1
High/Scope Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA)	1
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	1
University of Florida Developmental Wheel	1
NCAST	1
Early Intervention Developmental Profile (EIDP)	1

STAR Early Literacy	1
AIMSWEB	1
Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)	1
Gates McGintie	1
Growing Great Kids	1
Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF-P)	1
Peabody Motor	1
Caregiver/Teacher Report Form (CTRF)	1
Developmental Profile: 3 (DP-3)	1
QWLS	1
Kaufman Brief Intelligence Scale (K-BIT)	1
Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation	1
Preschool Language Scale (PLS)	1
Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (ROW) &	
Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPT)	1

Appendix C
Use of Assessment Data

Use	Responses
To give feedback to parents at conferences	193
To adjust planning	176
For needs assessment	156
To share information with kindergarten teachers	107
For licensing requirements	43
Teacher Trainings	3
Grant writing	2
N/A	2
To evaluate the teachers	1

Appendix D
Professional Development: Opportunities Sought

Training Topic	Responses
Handling problem behavior or difficult children	161
Curriculum-specific training	140
Special needs or inclusion	129
New activities and projects	117
Information on current and upcoming policy changes	99
Community building strategies	85
Licensing requirements	72
Enrollment and retention strategies	44
Child safety	42
Parental Involvement	3
Marriage/Separation	2
Assessment	2
Health	1
Literacy Programs	1
Domestic Violence	1
Addictions	1
Parenting	1
Multi-Cultural	1
Problem solving	1
Program Building	1

Appendix E
Professional Development: Barriers to Attendance

Reason	Responses
Center has limited funds.	88
Difficult to cover shifts of employees in training.	77
Trainings are too expensive for individual staff members.	74
Trainings are not offered locally.	68
Can't afford to give staff time off.	47
Training offered is too basic.	46
Staff already receives sufficient training.	31
We can only afford or require the training needed for licensing.	28
Unaware of training opportunities.	22
Not enough advance notice given for training.	8