

Chapter 3

Shaping a Validity Argument for the Use of Authentic Formative Assessments to Support Young Children

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ABSTRACT

The measurement properties of any assessment system should be rigorously examined as long as the measure is in use. Authentic formative assessments are not immune to this process. Messick provided a comprehensive theory of test validation that conceptualized validity as a unitary construct. He identified six distinct types of evidence that can support the inferences made from assessment scores, all of which are applied to the process of validating authentic formative assessment measures. The validation argument for direct summative assessments is compared to the distinct aspects of a validity argument to support formative assessments for young children. Specific sources of construct irrelevant variance in the information provided by authentic formative assessments are also outlined. The complex constellation of purposes for which authentic formative assessments have been developed is unified by a single underlying principle: usefulness to teachers.

SHAPING A VALIDITY ARGUMENT FOR THE USE OF AUTHENTIC FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN

The current educational climate is marked by the widespread use of direct assessments for high stakes accountability purposes. Educational policy makers seem unable to resist counting anything that can be counted without respect to whether all of this counting is helpful to teachers, impacts teacher stress levels, or even produces valid, meaningful, or useful information (Lambert & Ullrich, 2012). Cameron, back in 1963, foreshadowed this era when he noted that “not everything that can be counted counts, and

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not everything that counts can be counted” (Cameron, 1963). In contrast to high stakes direct summative assessments, high quality authentic formative assessment (AFA) measures can provide valid information that helps teachers focus on what is important for each child.

No discussion of formative assessment is complete, however, without the recognition that teaching is a challenging and stressful profession. Teaching, along with other helping professions, has been widely recognized as one of the most stressful occupations; and teachers are among the most widely researched professionals in the occupational stress literature (Travers & Cooper, 1996; Dunham & Varma, 1998; Kyriacou, 2000, Kyriacou, 2001). Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1977) defined teacher stress as “a response by a teacher of negative affect...as a result of the demands made upon the teacher in his role as a teacher” which is driven by “the degree to which the teacher perceives that he is unable to meet the demands made upon him” (p. 299). Excessive administrative burdens have been found to contribute to teacher stress levels (Moriarty, Edmonds, Blatchford, & Martin, 2001; Lambert et al., 2012), and teachers often appraise mandated assessment measures as simply another administrative demand.

The transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), has been extended to occupational stress in educational settings (Lambert et al, 2009). According to this theoretical model, stress has been conceptualized as a perceived imbalance between the demands teacher’s experience in their classrooms and the personal and professional resources they have to combat those demands. When teachers appraise demands as outweighing available resources, they are at risk for occupational stress and other associated psychological and occupational concerns (McCarthy et al., 2016).

Whether they are mandated or optional, commercially available or locally made, assessment measures that yield valid information are essential instructional resources for teachers. However, when teachers perceive assessment resources as less than helpful, as simply additional demands on their limited time and energy, assessments can actually contribute to making teaching a more stressful profession. In contrast, when assessments provide meaningful and useful information to teachers, and are perceived by teachers as valuable resources, they can help make teaching easier and more effective, and thereby less stressful.

So, what constitutes usefulness to teachers of young children? How can teachers of young children know they are understanding the current status of a child’s growth, development, and learning with accuracy? How can they know what developmental tasks come next for each child? How can they know that they are structuring learning experiences that are supporting children in the most helpful ways?

Assessment Within the Instructional Process

Let us begin to address these questions by way of an analogy. When we plan a trip, we first have to decide where are we going. We have to select the destination. We then have to answer the question, how are we going to get there? We have to select the methods of transportation. Next, we focus on the route we are going to take. We focus on questions like, what important landmarks do we want to see along the way? How are we going to know when we get to each interim destination along the way, and what will we see at each stage of the journey? In short, we develop an itinerary.

The destination is analogous to the particular standards for child learning that apply in a given teaching context. Such standards, whether they are defined by the local or state education agency, or come from federal standards in programs like Head Start, outline the places where we are hoping to end up with the children by the end of the academic year. The destination is also analogous to the applicable curricular objectives or child outcomes that are the focus of the programs or schools within which each teacher works.

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