

## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Authenticity of Assessment in Inclusive Spaces

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Barriers related to assessment may prevent high quality transition practices from occurring. Traditionally, assessment of young children involves table top testing where an assessor asks a child to perform standardized tasks that are often lacking developmental appropriateness with unfamiliar materials, in unfamiliar environments like a sterile clinical setting, and/or with people who are unfamiliar to the child. True skills may not be observed under such conditions as a traditional assessment. Alternatively, professionals today across multiple sectors use authentic assessment to measure child outcomes that can be used to better understand children's development and learning during the transition from preschool to kindergarten process. Authentic "real-life" assessments measure skills that are functional rather than contrived, discrete tasks. This research-to-practice article shares practical application for authentic assessment leading to high quality transitions for children and families from preschool to kindergarten.

*Keywords:* authentic assessment, child development, early childhood education

### INTRODUCTION

A typewriter is a tool that can be used to write comedy, a love story, or a fairy tale. Assessment is also a tool we use in early childhood settings to learn about a child's development and learning. A fairy tale is not "real-life," but a fantasy. Many traditional assessments are built on fantasy where they do not show actual skills a person possesses that are functional and enable them to navigate their usual environments independently. Traditionally, assessment of young children involves table top testing where an assessor asks a child to perform standardized tasks that are often lacking developmental appropriateness with unfamiliar materials, in unfamiliar environments like a sterile clinical setting, and/or with people who are unfamiliar to the child. True skills may not be observed under such conditions as a traditional assessment.

Alternative approaches to traditional assessment are warranted. Sitting beside and getting to know is the original meaning of the word "assessment" or "assidere" in Latin. Authentic assessment is like a typewriter because both are tools that can be used for multiple purposes.

When conducting an authentic assessment, the observer notices a child navigating their familiar environments, with people who are familiar to the child, and with materials that are part of their daily routines. Authentic assessment captures an ongoing story of what the child can do and what they might need. While many professionals would likely prefer conducting assessments of children with an authentic approach that incorporates their families and natural environments, there are at least five barriers that persist that can be overcome with practical applications.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Individualized transition practices are recommended when children transition from preschool to kindergarten. However, many early childhood programs continue to utilize a group strategy for transition practices. Additionally, there are several barriers related to assessment which exist that prevent high quality transition practices from occurring. This next section will share limitations along with possible solutions, or practical applications, for authentic assessment leading to high quality transitions from preschool to kindergarten.

### Collaboration

First, authentic assessment is possibly defined differently by professionals from education, health, and social service sectors (Macy, 2023). Multidisciplinary teams that represent diverse fields may not appreciate and/or recognize how to embed authentic assessment practices that are recommended by professional organizations. Families may be excluded in the assessment process when the professional team is not collaborating effectively.

Establish positive rapport and working relationship with the team, which includes families, to create optimal conditions for collaboration. Assessment requires professional collaboration across sectors. Many different professionals come together to support the child and family during this time. Authentic assessment can be used as a common tool to strengthen the connections across the team. Implement practices to gather input from team members using observations and insights using authentic assessment tools that are linked to curriculum and instruction.

### Shared Understanding

Another barrier for high quality transition practices is the lack of a shared definition of authentic assessment. As defined by Bagnato and Yeh-Ho (2006), "Authentic assessment refers to the systematic recording of developmental observations over time about the naturally occurring behaviors and functional competencies of young children in daily routines by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers in the child's life" (p.29). Authentic assessment relies on reports and observations from parents and adults who have a relationship with the child. Yet people who are strangers to the child often conduct assessments. Professionals need a shared definition of authentic assessment and the child are needed to fully support their transition to kindergarten.

Create a shared definition of the authentic assessment process with the team. This can be done during the first transition meeting and then reviewed each time the team meets. Authentic assessment focuses on the child's strength and provides a clear understanding of the child's needs (Bagnato et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2015). Team members benefit when there are clear expectations and when the team has a shared understanding of the process.

## Materials and Equipment Familiar to Child

A third barrier is that some who assess young children may prefer the convenience of kits and prepackaged materials. However, objects within the child's natural everyday environment are perhaps superior for observing the child. Common materials that are used during routines show what the child can do, emergent skills, and not yet skills. Familiar materials and equipment may be more difficult for professionals to incorporate in their assessments because it requires creativity and spontaneity.

Familiar materials can show what the child can do. To apply authentic assessment practices, use materials and equipment that the child will be familiar with that can be found in their home and/or familiar places like school and/or community. Use materials that are culturally appropriate for the child and family. Communicate with family members to determine what they prefer. Be sure that materials and equipment are individually and developmentally appropriate for each child.

## Professional Development

The fourth barrier to high quality transition practices is training. Many professionals lack formal training in how to conduct authentic assessment. In a study of multidisciplinary professionals, many reported they had no formal training or professional development in the use of authentic assessment (Bagnato et al, in press). Participants in the study shared the way they learned how to do authentic assessment was on the job training.

Coordinated professional development around authentic assessment is recommended. Take a workshop, class, or session(s) at an early childhood professional conference for training on how to assess children with authenticity when they transition from preschool to kindergarten. Pre-service and in-service professional development programs should have a comprehensive curriculum and it should include assessment, and specifically authentic assessment (Bagnato, 2007; Grisham-Brown et al., 2008; Macy, Bagnato, & Gallen, 2016; Macy, Bagnato, & Weiszaupt, 2019; Sheridan et al., 2009). Professional development can help with implementation of high-quality transition practices and assessment.

## Mindset

The final barrier is that many professionals view authentic assessment as requiring more time to administer and extra resources. The perceptions that authentic assessment takes longer than traditional assessment approaches is false (Bagnato & Macy, forthcoming). However, it may impact professional opinion and adoption of naturalistic assessment practices (Bagnato & Macy, 2010).

Allow a growth curve when adopting new practices. It may take time to fully adopt authentic assessment practices. Creating a growth mindset is helpful when implementing authentic assessment practices to support transitions. Children and families will benefit from professionals who are positively supporting a high-quality passage from preschool to kindergarten.

Given these barriers, it is worthwhile to examine assessment practices when children and their families embark on their journey into kindergarten. Practical application of research-based assessment strategies can be applied. Discovering ways to overcome limitations of assessment practices can be beneficial for gaining an accurate understanding of child development and learning. A true picture of development and learning can be leveraged to obtain understanding that leads to better goals, instruction/intervention, curriculum, and evaluation of the program when a child transitions to a new setting like kindergarten (Bagnato et al., 2011; Grisham-Brown et al., 2006).

### PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT: TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN

Writers are encouraged to “show” and not “tell” when communicating to the reader. Just like a writer using a typewriter to express ideas or communicate, an assessment can transfer information about learning and development. Assessment is the process of gathering information. Links to programmatic efforts are ideal when meaningful assessment is aligned to teaching and evaluation in preschool and kindergarten settings (Hidayat et al., 2021; Macy & Bagnato, 2023). When we observe children in their natural environment doing things that are developmentally appropriate for them, we can learn about them. Authentic assessment can show objective and subjective information about a child that is obtained from observation.

Objective data are the facts. Like the child makes eye contact with their parent or familiar caregiver. Subjective data are observations that have the assessor’s opinion or judgment. Like the child seems happy when their parent enters the room. Authentic assessment results can include both types of data from observing children engage in “real-life” activities that are meaningful and relevant to them that can be used when children transition from preschool settings to kindergarten (Kaya, 2018; Macy & Bagnato, 2010).

Professionals across multiple sectors use authentic assessment to measure child outcomes that can be used to better understand children’s development and learning during the transition process. Authentic “real-life” assessments measure skills that are functional rather than contrived, discrete tasks that are meant to differentiate performance on a norm-referenced measure. Many commercial child focused assessments exist that are authentic and have strong psychometric properties (Bagnato & Macy, forthcoming). There are multiple people on the child’s team who can provide information with authentic assessment. Table 1 shows different people who use authentic assessment.

**Table 1***Who Conducts Authentic Assessment?*

<b>Professionals who conduct contextual assessments</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Families</b>	<b>Environments</b>
Early Childhood Educators	Yes	Yes	Yes
Early Interventionists	Yes	Yes	Yes
Early Childhood Special Educators	Yes	Yes	Yes
Occupational Therapists	Yes	Maybe	Maybe
Physical Therapists	Yes	Maybe	Maybe
Psychologists	Yes	Yes	Maybe
Social Workers	Yes	Yes	Yes
Speech/Language Specialists	Yes	Maybe	Maybe
Pediatricians	Yes	Maybe	Maybe
Nurses	Yes	Maybe	Maybe

Researchers have studied implementation of authentic assessment practices and found reliable and valid outcomes when used by educators (Moreno & Klute, 2011). When people who are familiar with the child conduct authentic assessments, children are more likely to show their skills. Materials and equipment that are in their everyday settings can benefit the assessment process in addition to familiarity with people doing assessments. The AEPS-3 Ready Set (Bricker et al., 2022a) is an authentic assessment tool that can communicate information about children's learning and development when they transition to kindergarten. For practical application, a webinar entitled, "Introducing the AEPS-3 Ready Set" was developed that can be accessed at [this YouTube link](#).

### Practical Applications for Authentic Assessment and Families

Writing a love story with authentic assessment involves the child's family and familiar caregivers when they transition to new inclusive settings that are welcoming. Family members can provide a distinctive lens into understanding child development and learning. Authentic assessment can be used to support effective communication between professionals and parents (Macy, Bagnato, & Weiszaupt, 2019). Parents can also be the first to notice if the child has variations in their development and/or learning. For practical application, the National Head Start Association has developed, "Toolkit: School Readiness and the Every Student Succeeds Act" and can be accessed at [this link](#).

Contextual/environmental authentic assessments are used to gain a deeper understanding of the child and family. The ecological theory provides a foundation for determining factors that influence a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Environmental assessments consider many elements that play a role in the child's learning and development that are important during transition. The AEPS-3 Family Assessment of Child

Skills (FACS; Bricker et al., 2022b) is an authentic assessment tool that relies on family observations and input.

Since the AEPS-3 was published in 2022, some studies have examined how professionals and parents view development. One study compared parental and professional views during transition to kindergarten with children attending Montessori preschool programs in Florida and Idaho (Macy et al., 2022). Another study compared Head Start parents and professionals views of child development (Macy et al., in press). Both studies found congruency between parental and professional opinions.

More action research with practical application is warranted on how to use authentic assessment to facilitate transitions for children and their families (Macy et al., 2019; Rome, 2016). Future directions may include professionals using the AEPS-3 Ready Set and FACS with parents whose home language is different from English, as well as utilization of the AEPS online platform to collaborate with families (Macy, 2010; Macy, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Assessments and typewriters are tools that can be used to tell a story. Writing a story during transition to kindergarten can be enhanced with the use of authentic assessment. Authentic assessment can be a way to create a sense of belonging for children, their families, and professionals. Inclusive spaces are places where everyone belongs.

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