



NATIONAL CENTER *for* CHILDREN & FAMILIES  
ADVANCING POLICY, EDUCATION, & DEVELOPMENT

TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH BRIEF

*Using Assessment to Improve School Readiness and Head Start Program Quality*

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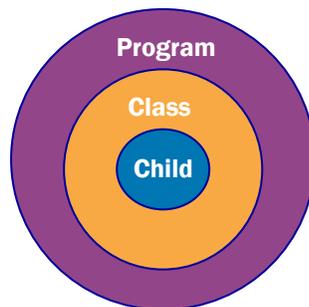
*Accountability* and *school readiness* are two of the most important buzzwords in American early care and education today. The former refers to assessing children's gains and program quality and then using the data to make program improvements. The latter encompasses children's preparation for entry into stimulating learning environments; it implies that quality early childhood preparation coupled with supportive schools, families, and communities are readiness requisites. No preschool program is defined by accountability and school readiness more than Head Start, the nation's foremost comprehensive early care and education program for young children and their low-income families.



The Using Assessments Project:

- Pioneers a unique and holistic approach to early childhood accountability.
- Improves outcomes for Head Start programs, classrooms, and children.
- Shows supporting teachers in the use of assessments is critical to program success.

The goal of the **Using Assessments Project (UAP)** is to improve children's school readiness and the quality of Head Start programs through a systematic approach to accountability. The UAP rests on two beliefs: first, that implementing child assessments, while necessary, is not sufficient to enhance children's readiness for school, and second, that multiple factors influence children's ability to learn. These beliefs led to a hypothesis: that Head Start program management interacts with the quality of the classroom environment, and together these contexts impact children's school readiness. To test this hypothesis, using a randomized trial design, the UAP implemented assessments across three levels—program, class, and child—as tools for improvement while simultaneously providing Head Start staff with technical assistance and support in how to use and apply assessment data.



*Figure 1. The Using Assessments Project Hypothesis. Program management interacts with the quality of the classroom environment, and together these contexts impact children's school readiness.*

Based on the principles of professional collaboration and mutual benefit, the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University partnered with Head Start programs in Connecticut to discern if and how the UAP could improve (i) the overall climate of Head Start programs, (ii) the quality of Head Start classrooms, and (iii) the school readiness of Head Start children. Unique and holistic in design, this intervention built upon past theoretical knowledge regarding children's development, readiness, program change and improvement, and the effective use of assessment.

### *The Intervention*

Using this innovative approach, the UAP was implemented in two distinctively different Head Start programs over two years. The intervention consisted of a series of assessments—two at the program level, three at the classroom level, and one at the child level—used by Head Start staff at periodic intervals during the school year. Following the administration of each assessment, an assessment coordinator supported program directors, education coordinators, and the teaching team as they interpreted assessment results and then used the data to modify their practices. This support took the form of weekly class visits, monthly team meetings, and ongoing coaching of individual teachers. In addition, Columbia research staff evaluated the implementation and the impact of the UAP using data from 129 staff, 18 classrooms, and 201 children.

### *Impact*

Using a holistic approach, the UAP targeted three levels simultaneously—the programs, the classrooms, and the children. The UAP resulted in improvements in each:

For Head Start programs:

- Improved overall program management climate
- Specific areas of improvement: communication, policy clarity, hiring, and retention
- Maintenance of benefits over time despite reduced support

For classrooms:

- Significant improvements in the overall classroom environment
- Significant improvements in the instructional environment, especially the learning environment and the individualization of instruction
- Maintenance of benefits over time despite reduced support
- Accrual of additional benefits in the second year, including more supportive and constructive teaching practices

For children:

- Significant gains in early writing and problem-solving skills
- Improved self-regulation
- Effects by gender: girls demonstrated greater improvement in self-regulation and literacy (including vocabulary), while boys tended to perform better in mathematics (including problem-solving and drawing/perceptual skills)

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### Recommendations

The UAP's positive outcomes have important implications for practice and policy affecting all early childhood programs, not only Head Start. The UAP intervention clearly demonstrates that when assessment is (i) broadly conceptualized and (ii) immediately linked with professional development support, improved outcomes for programs, classrooms, and children ensue.

Unlike prior intervention efforts, the UAP began with the premise that assessment would be most successful when implemented and supported across multiple program levels. By focusing on the stacked intervention—using program, classroom, and child assessments simultaneously—the assessment mystique was removed; assessment became normative practice. Rather than being a foreign construct, ongoing assessment came to be understood as a logical, necessary, and accepted part of program improvement. Policy-makers and practitioners therefore need to address prevailing resistance to assessment by incorporating it into the fabric of programs. This objective can be accomplished by looking carefully at performance standards, child standards, and program standards, as well as at voluntary accreditation systems. All of these policies should explicitly mention the need for systematic, ongoing assessment of children, classrooms, and program climate.

In addition, none of the achieved gains would have been possible without the ongoing support and technical assistance provided to staff. Specifically, technical assistance took the form of:

- effective administration of the assessments;
- appropriate interpretation of data that emerged from the assessments; and
- implementation of modifications in practice as suggested by the assessments.

With ongoing support in learning how to use assessments correctly and interpreting data from them consistently, staff were able to have confidence in the data collected and in understanding results. Ongoing technical assistance also helped staff develop concrete operational plans to improve the conditions reflected in the data, be it at the program, classroom, or child level. Policy-makers and the policies they create must acknowledge that assessment without support for change is not a successful improvement strategy. Assessment must be directly coupled with professional development. Moreover, professional development should be directly targeted to findings from the data: global technical assistance is much less relevant than data-driven technical assistance. In short, this effort suggests that much closer attention must be accorded to the nature and amount of technical assistance for educators if we expect the improvement that the UAP achieved and that we want for all of America's early learning programs.



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*"Our mission is to advance the development and education of children and their families through the production of scholarship that informs practice and policy."*

## *The Center*

The National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) advances the policy, education, and development of children and their families. Housed at Teachers College, Columbia University, NCCF challenges the status quo that perpetuates inequalities among children and families. Our work is built on a commitment to eliminate educational, economic, and employment disparities through the production and application of the highest quality scholarship to the most intransigent social problems.

NCCF's extensive research programs benefit multiple constituents, including researchers, policy-makers, early childhood teacher educators, Head Start teachers and directors, practitioners, families, and the general public. From inner-city neighborhoods to rural preschools and public schools, from state capitals throughout the U.S. to ministries of education in developing nations, our work has three primary goals:

- 1) the production of socially relevant, high-quality scholarship;
- 2) the preparation of next-generation leaders and scholars; and
- 3) the application of scholarship to the construction of effective social policy.

Working with NCCF's two co-directors, **Jeanne Brooks-Gunn**, Ph.D., and **Sharon Lynn Kagan**, Ed.D., the organization is made up of 35 dedicated, creative individuals, among them research scientists, graduate fellows, graduate students, research assistants, a communications director, a finance director, and support staff. The NCCF operating budget is approximately \$3 million annually, with research activities supported by an endowment from the Marx Family Foundation and a broad range of private and public funders, including: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; The Pew Charitable Trusts; The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; The David and Lucille Packard Foundation; The Carnegie Corporation of New York; and the state governments of Washington, Ohio, Mississippi, Colorado, and North Carolina. Together, these funds support the achievement of the center's goals.

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