Early Interventionists’ Reports of Authentic Assessment Methods Through Focus Group Research

Bonnie Keilty  
*University of North Carolina, Charlotte*

Diana J. LaRocco  
*University of Hartford*

Faye Bankler Casell  
*Cooke Center for Learning and Development*

Authentic assessments are naturalistic methods to obtain functional, contextual information relevant to learning in routine activities. Seven focus groups were conducted with 73 practicing Part C early interventionists to gather their reports on authentic assessments. Participants reported various ways of applying authentic assessment methods, with eligibility determination identified as the most difficult assessment decision point and progress monitoring as the easiest assessment decision point to use such strategies. Barriers and facilitators to using authentic assessments were described in the themes of administrative requirements, knowledge and experience, and family-professional partnerships. Implications for professional development systems and early intervention leadership are discussed.

**Keywords:** assessment; early intervention; infants; toddlers

Recommended practices in early childhood assessment have increasingly called for the use of authentic assessment methods aligned with developmentally appropriate assessment principles (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004, 2005). Authentic assessments gather information of a child’s functioning in everyday routine activities (i.e., contextualized) through naturalistic inquiry methods (e.g., observation and interview) to provide meaningful data in support of learning and development within the same activities (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001). The authentic assessment process includes examining the effects of the current social and physical environments on the child’s learning and participation in those routine activities as areas for potential modifications or adaptations (Darrah, Law, & Pollock, 2001). Authentic assessment methods are designed to address expressed concerns with decontextualized, standardized instruments that are often not validated with young children with disabilities and do not offer information relevant to a child’s functioning or intervention planning (Fuchs, Fuchs, Benowitz, & Barringer, 1987; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1992, 2004; Siegel-Causey & Allinder, 1998).

In early intervention for families of infants and toddlers with or at risk for developmental delays or disabilities, professionals ordinarily gather assessment information at three decision points—eligibility determination, program planning, and progress monitoring (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2005). Researchers have found that specific authentic systems, such as the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System for Eligibility (AEPS:E; Bricker, 2002) and work sampling, are reliable tools for eligibility determination and predict performance on norm-referenced assessments (Macy, Bricker, & Squires, 2005; Meisels, Liaw, Dorfman, & Nelson, 1995). Macy and colleagues (2005) reported on the AEPS:E to determine eligibility for toddlers. In a sample of 68 children, the AEPS:E identified the same eligibility status for all eligible children and all but 4 ineligible children as determined by traditional eligibility instruments, with an overall 94% agreement for both eligible and ineligible children. Three of the four children found eligible by the AEPS:E but not via traditional instruments were within one or two points of the traditional instrument’s eligibility score.

Similarly, Bagnato and Neisworth (1994) reported that authentic assessment methods facilitated eligibility