



Progress Monitoring: A Conversation with Dr. Susan Landry and Dr. Mike Assel

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The term “Progress Monitoring” should be a familiar one to TEEM teachers and mentors, but what is it really, and how does it impact children’s learning? In this article, CLI Director Dr. Susan Landry and C-PALLS co-developer Dr. Mike Assel talk about the concept of Progress Monitoring and the role it plays in the TEEM/TSR! approach to promoting quality Pre-K education.

CG: Dr Assel, can you explain, in layperson’s terms, what “progress monitoring” is and what it’s used for?

MA: Progress monitoring is a brief form of assessment that provides data that teachers can use within their classroom to directly inform and individualize instruction. That’s really what we’re focused on: improving the quality of instructional opportunities available to children in Pre-K.

CG: What kinds of skills are assessed as part of progress monitoring, and how does the assessment process work?

MA: In our C-PALLS system (CIRCLE PHonological Awareness, Language, and Literacy System), we assess “The Big Three” which are Phonological Awareness, Letter Knowledge, and Language, and we’ve recently added a Math screener as well. The whole assessment takes just about 16 minutes to administer and is designed to be done 3 times per year: Fall, Winter, and Spring. We keep testing time short so that the assessment process itself doesn’t interfere with instructional time in the classroom. We include brief, timed measures (i.e., 1 minute each) that can give a valid reflection of the range of a child’s skills in a specific area like vocabulary or letter knowledge.

SL: We are using a *fluency* paradigm as opposed to using a more comprehensive set of test items that takes much longer to administer. Those kinds of norm-referenced, lengthy tests are often not appropriate or feasible for teachers to administer. The fluency paradigm, which is a well-validated

approach to assessing knowledge, basically says that what a child can show in a short period of time is related to what they would be able to do on a more comprehensive test of the same skill. It is a particularly useful approach for teachers because it is brief and efficient. The words we use on the Vocabulary test, for example, were selected from well-accepted, research-based lists of vocabulary words that 3 and 4-year-olds are likely to know. It's also important to understand that we do not provide information to teachers about which items an individual child got correct or incorrect on the PM measures, and there's a good reason for that. We do not want teachers to just teach kids the particular words that are on the test. That would not be helpful at all, and in fact would misrepresent what a child's range of knowledge really is.

CG: How was the current PM system developed?

MA: We wanted to develop a system that was user-friendly, that was empirically grounded (i.e., based on research about what Pre-K skills best predict success in Kindergarten), and that led to improved instructional practices in the classroom. We reviewed the systems that were already available to pre-K teachers for PM, but most lacked empirically sound research documenting their effectiveness. In addition, they were often cumbersome to administer or tied to one specific curriculum. So we went back to the research literature to select the types of skills to measure that were highly predictive of later academic success and that also lent themselves to brief, repeated assessments over time. Once we determined which skills to include, we created a paper-and-pencil version of the PM measures that required the teacher to use a stopwatch, flip a picture chart, and record the child's responses simultaneously. Later we were able to work with several technology vendors to develop PDA-based, laptop-based, and Netbook-based versions that remove some of the "hands-on demands" on teachers, making it easier to administer.

SL: We conducted a study (published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, May 2009¹) that examined what components of instruction and assessment would give the most positive effects in producing a quality Pre-K environment. We compared the paper-and-pencil version of our PM system to the PDA-based version, and we found that intensive professional development using the eCIRCLE course, in combination with the PDA-based Progress Monitoring tool plus in-class mentoring gave us the best outcomes: more positive gains in teachers' instructional practices, more responsiveness in their interactions with children, more exposure to vocabulary in the way they read books and the ways they talked to children, and their use of creative activities to build phonological awareness and letter

knowledge. Those changes in turn gave us the strongest changes in children – the best improvements in their language skills, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge. The gains were so much stronger for the PM system using the PDA vs. the pencil & paper version because the teacher got immediate feedback about how the children were doing, how to group them into small learning groups by skill, and what activities to do with which group.

CG: Are there any upcoming changes related to the PM system that teachers will want to know about?

MA: Well, we actually made a number of changes in preparation for this school year (2009-2010). The biggest one that teachers will recognize is that we have tied all their activities into the newly revised teacher manual, the CIRCLE Activities Manual. The other big new thing that teachers will notice is that the Math screener has moved from the piloting phase to being included on the PDA platform. The 27 items from the Math screener are there for online data input which is also tied to the Math activities in the revised CIRCLE Manual. The “cut scores” that indicate whether kids are determined to be “progressing well” or at “mild risk” or at “significant risk” have also been updated. Those changes are built into the program, so teachers won’t see them, but they will be based on the latest data from our outcome research.

CG: How have teachers responded to the technology aspect of progress monitoring and is the system working as you hoped it would?

MA: At first some teachers are a bit tentative about the new technology because there are a lot of new things they have to learn – they go through a half-day training, and they have to get used to the feel of the PDA and how to move through the assessments in the way they were designed. However, after they get through that initial learning curve, we find that teachers start to see that the tool has a lot of value for them in their classrooms and they really appreciate the fact that it’s tied to the activities in the CIRCLE manual. They tell us that it does lend itself to helping them become better teachers. This year the PDA-based PM system is slated to be used in over 3000 Texas Pre-K classrooms.

CG: Some people worry that by assessing preschool-age kids, we are heading down a path of standardized testing that’s not developmentally appropriate, or will lead to results being used in inappropriate ways. Can you speak to that concern?

MA: The goal of the State Center and CLI is to provide teachers with useful, practical information that will help guide their choice of instructional activities. The PM system was *not* designed to be used to

diagnose children or for program directors or school district officials to rate teachers. It is information that is made *for* teachers, to help them organize their classroom instruction so kids have the best opportunities to learn.

SL: Another thing that's critically important to understand is that the PM assessments are not supposed to be the only type of assessment happening in the classroom. Above and beyond the three administrations of the PM tool, teachers should be doing curriculum-linked progress-monitoring, systematically checking children's knowledge of the concepts and words that were presented in their curriculum units. Did the child learn what they taught? Then if the child does not know a specific word or concept that was taught, the teacher needs to revisit that area and re-teach. Our PDA-based assessment is not meant to be the only way that teachers monitor children's learning. It's a tool to support teachers in providing children with the best quality classroom experience.

¹Landry, S.H., Anthony, J.L., Swank, P.R., & Monseque-Bailey, P. (2009). Effectiveness of comprehensive professional development for teachers of at-risk preschoolers. Journal of Educational Psychology, 101(2), 448-465.