Early Years Twilight Seminar Video: About the assessment tools

So, the slide that has just gone up is a list of the tools that we reviewed.

Jen did a really good job of describing the framework, the lens that we use to look at assessment tools, and I just want to really reiterate, there are lots and lots of tools out there that are designed for clinicians and they're limited to only be used by development or educational psychologists.

They cost thousands of dollars. They take hours, if not days, to do and they're not very useful for us when we’re thinking more generally about measuring the learning of children we’re working with.

So, for me, this was a really exciting opportunity to look at what is out there that the educators working with kids today could use.

And I really do take the point, not just jump out and start using it immediately, but begin talking about, thinking about, what constructs in there are we actually interested in measuring?

Why do we do this? How do we do this? Do we need some training and support to go and use it for the first time? And it was a really great point that was made that if you take a tool and start using it, but you’re kind of just making it up as you go along because you’re relying on second-hand instructions, well, it’s not going to be very useful if you then want to compare the kind of evidence you’re collecting about kids’ learning with other practitioners, because you're not using the same tool - you're using it differently.

So I'm going to talk about three of these tools. The first one is under the ‘Learning’ heading there - the Measuring Early Learning Quality & Outcomes tool.

I really like this tool. I use it in my research.

And because I've used it a bit, I’ve really been keen to talk about it with as many people as possible.

One of the reasons why I like it is it’s open-source and it’s free.

Anyone in the world can go to the MELQO website and grab a copy.

And it’s got really good supporting documentation that describes what it’s about.

Like, where did these items to assess kids’ learning come from? Now, it is designed to be used in the developing world.

It was designed by the World Bank and UNICEF and the Brookings Institute.

But I’ve used it in Australia and I’ve also used it in Indonesia and I’ve also used it in Papua New Guinea.

And it works well across all of those sites.

The other thing I really like about it is it’s an omnibus measure.

It measures a whole bunch of different things.

It gives us evidence about kids’ pre-literacy and pre-mathematics - not relevant to this lit review - but in addition to that, social and emotional skills, executive function and writing ability.

It’s a one-on-one assessment tool. So, it’s done with children in the learning space.

I’m pleased to say that it’s mostly built around activities and games - things that kids are naturally engaged with.

It can be done in a way... yes, it is an assessment tool, but it can be done in a way that it is engaging and interesting to young children.

And, as an example of some of the activities, when we measure kids’ executive function using the MELQO, the items around working memory are number sequences.

So the activities around ‘I'm going to read you out a list of numbers. ‘Can you remember them? Can you read them back to me?’

And then we ramp up the difficulty and say, ‘Can you remember them ‘and read them back to me in reverse order?’ Now, it sounds a bit dry when I say it in front of an audience, but you can imagine how you could make that an engaging experience and conversation with a child.

Similarly, the measure of inhibition control. It’s called the Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes task. And we set it up by showing kids that the rules are, just like Simon Says, you know, when I say, ‘Touch your head,’ touch your head. When I say, ‘Touch your shoulders,’ touch your shoulders. And then we flip it around and we say, ‘Okay, now we’re going to change the rules.

And when I say, ‘Touch your head,’ you’re going to touch your toes. Right?

There’s a series of items where the kids have to... ..they learn the ‘Touch your head, touch your shoulders, touch your knees, touch your toes.’

Now they’re going to receive that information, the instruction, they’re going to process it, go, ‘Ah! No, the rules changed. Now I do the opposite.’ And we reiterate through a few of those and that’s how we build some evidence of inhibition control.

The other thing I wanted to quickly talk about was some measures of social and emotional skills. I’ll talk quickly about the Social Skills Improvement System and the Early ABLES. I’m really interested in kids’ social skills and we’ve just started some work now about how to measure it in different places.

So I’ve been thinking about this a lot.

The SSIS is a US-based tool and it’s a checklist.

So there are a series of statements and the educator indicates whether the child never, sometimes, often or always does these behaviours.

And they’re things like, ‘Says please’, ‘Pays attention to instructions’, ‘Makes eye contact’, ‘Lies’. And so you can see that that’s all really about,’Do children know social rules or do they have these kind of negative behaviours?’

In contrast to that, we’ve got the Early ABLES. Has anyone used the Early ABLES?

This is a Victorian measure. I see some nodding.

Yeah, yeah. I really, really like the Early ABLES, and not just because I was at the University of Melbourne when they were making it.

But it’s much more about a continuum of social and emotional development.

It’s about the expectation that children’s ability to function interpersonally should increase over time. Right? It’s not about just saying, ‘Do you know the rules? Check. Alright, you're done.’

It’s about a progression of social skills. And I will put a caveat on it, because I did promise to do that, that Early ABLES is a measure that was designed in partnership with Victorian Government, but it’s specifically for children with a diagnosis or with additional needs.

But I think it has a lot of potential in the future to be broadened in its scope.

But the really nice thing about it is its focus on interpersonal skills and social skills from a growth perspective means that over time we can go back and do the assessment again and collect evidence of children’s growth and competence and choose or decide whether we're being really effective in the way we're intervening on kids’ learning and development.