

The Appropriate use of Assessment in a High Quality Classroom Helps Young Children Learn¹

Assessment includes the strategies that teachers use to understand students' knowledge and skills, inform and individualize instruction, and track children's progress in reaching learning goals over time. Exceptional early childhood teaching is individualized and responsive to each child's needs, interests, and experiences. It is therefore predicated on teachers' awareness of their students' knowledge and abilities.

From prekindergarten through 3rd grade, children's growth can be rapid, unpredictable, and episodic. All aspects of young children's development are deeply interrelated. Indeed, young children's "emotional, social, physical, and thinking abilities are intertwined like a multi-fibred weaving. Each strand forms an essential part of the whole."² Furthermore, a young child's development is sensitive to his or her economic status, family stability, health care, nutrition, and key adult relationships. Because of the way that young children learn and can demonstrate their skills and knowledge, assessment for young children (under age 8) is quite different from the strategies that work with older students. When done according to best practices, assessments provide teachers with individualized information about children that should inform their ongoing decisions about daily activities. Effective teachers use a range of assessment strategies to understand and promote their students' learning and growth. Indeed, great care must be taken to use appropriate assessment tools and collect information about children in many ways, at many points in time.

For assessment to provide useful information, the tools and approaches that teachers use to collect information about their students should be valid and reliable. A valid tool accurately captures the knowledge and abilities it intends to collect. Valid tools are designed with a child's development in mind so that they are able to share their competencies in a natural environment. When assessing young children, it is important to keep in mind that an unfamiliar environment or assessment administrator may inhibit a child's ability to share their knowledge and skills. To be valid, assessment tools must be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate. For children with developmental disabilities, only measures that have been designed and field-validated for use with children having specific needs should be used. Valid assessments for dual language learners should use a child's home language and may consider his progress toward English proficiency. An assessment tool must also be reliable, in that it should provide the same result when administered by different people to the same child or to the same child at two time points in close proximity.³

Assessment tools fall along a continuum, from informal to formal. On one end of the spectrum, informal



The writing sample on the top demonstrates a prekindergarten student's ability to write upper and lower case letters and his understanding of letter sounds. The sample on the bottom shows a first grade student's informational writing, which demonstrates an understanding of grammar rules and sentence structures. This type of work could be included in a student's portfolio.

"authentic" assessments use multiple methods to evaluate children's comprehension and approaches to learning within real life contexts that are grounded in naturally occurring instructional activities. These assessments are typically based on collections of students' work across developmental domains and subject areas. Authentic assessments are "criterion referenced," which means that the assessment compares students' own knowledge and skill over time. The results of authentic assessments are often used to guide teachers' instructional decisions with the individual students and promote children's learning. This form of assessment improves children's achievement. One study found that **students enrolled in classrooms that use a curriculum-embedded assessment instrument showed greater gains in reading compared to students who were not in such classrooms.**⁴

At the other end of the spectrum are formal assessments that use standardized instruments to collect information about children's development. Formal assessments are typically "norm-referenced" - a child's skills and abilities are compared to a larger group of peers who have previously taken such tests, and they have a high degree

of reliability and validity. These tools are often used to evaluate children or programs and make comparisons between individuals or groups.⁵ More formal assessments may also identify trends in a group of young learners' progress. Formal assessments are also used to identify children with special

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needs. Aggregated data can aid administrative decisions and future curriculum choices. Since it is normal and healthy for young students to have a wide range of knowledge and skills, the assessment instruments used to collect this information must be administered judiciously. Teachers need to be trained and supported in the use and interpretation of scores from the assessment tools.

Prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers use assessments carefully to document students' abilities and interests. Teachers frequently use authentic assessment techniques - collections of student work and anecdotal records - to understand developmental pathways for each child, track student progress, inform instruction, and collaborate with families.

In 1st and 2nd grades, teachers typically use formal assessments at the beginning of the school year to understand their students' skill levels and then again at the end of the year to track their students' progress in key subject areas. At this age, students' knowledge and skills continue to be highly influenced by their social context, and they may not be able to demonstrate their knowledge using paper and pencil testing. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to evaluate their students' during naturally occurring daily activities.

In 3rd grade, both authentic and formal assessments play a role in informing instruction. It is the first "tested" grade so students will participate in statewide standardized testing in the spring. As such, there is a temptation to limit instruction to tested content or allocate time to practicing test taking techniques at the expense of a more comprehensive instruction. With high quality standards, curricula, instruction, and use of authentic assessment, teachers can best prepare their students to succeed on standardized tests and support students' intellectual development.

High Quality Assessment in Action

In a 2nd grade classroom, the teacher uses a balance of authentic formative assessments and formal summative assessments. At the beginning of the year, she takes time to understand her students' family backgrounds and their previous experiences both in school and in their personal lives. For example, in the first week of school, she asks the students to write and draw in their journals about the things they like to do in their community and then share their stories with their classmates. The teacher is learning about her students' interests, and their communication skills. At the same time, she is also building a sense of community in the classroom. She has a portfolio for each student and collects work that pertains to his or her development in each domain: approaches to learning, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development,

and physical wellbeing. She also takes notes during her small group interactions in learning centers. The principal staffs the room with an assistant to ensure that the teacher can provide individualized instruction. Administration also provides her with time to review each student's work, identify students' strengths and weaknesses, and consider where the students are in meeting the New York State Learning Standards. These formative assessments will guide the way that she differentiates instruction throughout the year. The teacher couples these formative assessments with literacy profiles for each student three times a year to ensure every student is making progress towards meeting the appropriate standards. Then, according to the state policy, the students take formal assessments when required.

Assessment Supports the Essential Skills in the New York State Learning Standards



The New York State Learning Standards promote college and career readiness by describing the knowledge and skills in math, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language that students should gain as they advance through the grades. Like developmentally appropriate practice, the New York State Learning Standards support interdisciplinary learning, higher

order thinking, creativity, and the use of language and literacy skills throughout the day. The standards are neither a curriculum nor a set of assessments; rather they can help teachers and leaders select appropriate assessments and curriculum materials that will help young learners achieve a common set of skills as they progress through elementary school and beyond.

With the shift toward deeper mastery of a smaller set of skills and content, assessment strategies are changing. Indeed, assessment is increasingly important to delivering high quality instruction. It is critical that teachers are afforded adequate time to work with students to support and understand their mastery of the standards. To do so, teachers will have to work with each student in small group settings and in one-on-one interactions. They will also carefully evaluate collections of students' work. In other words,

they will need to use authentic assessment to determine the depth of students' acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

In adopting the New York State Learning Standards, New York's State Education Department has reoriented curricular resources and recommended assessment practices to align with the new standards. These new practices are not required, and school leaders may elect to use their own research based curricula and assessment tools. Regardless of the assessment tools used, their validity, reliability, and alignment with curriculum and the standards is critical to ensure they provide meaningful information to improve and individualize instruction for students.

Strategies For Teachers

- Begin the year by getting to know students' prior experience, cultural and community backgrounds, knowledge, and interests
- Create portfolios to collect each student's work across developmental domains and subject areas
- Devote time to interact individually with students to gauge their understanding of new information and take notes about students' progress
- Use assessments that are valid and reliable
- Interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction

Strategies For Leaders

- Select assessments that are aligned horizontally with learning standards and curricula and vertically with the standards, curricula, and assessment strategies that are used in other grades from prekindergarten through 3rd grade
- Encourage teachers to use authentic assessments to inform instruction throughout the year
- Use formal assessments carefully and structure teacher evaluations to maximize instructional time so that teachers can help students master comprehensive learning goals
- Provide adequate professional development for teachers and other staff to interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction

To learn more and view the other briefs in this series that address curriculum, the classroom environment, instruction and interactions, assessment and family engagement, please visit the New York ECAC website at www.nysecac.org or contact us ecac@ccf.ny.gov



In pre-kindergarten the teacher takes the time to assess the children's knowledge and skills in an authentic setting. "If I take away one car how many do you have? How do you know that?"

Photo courtesy of New York City Department of Education

Effective Use of Appropriate Assessments in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade: Building a Strong Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards

As members of the NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council, the NYS Head Start Collaboration Office, the NYS State Education Department, and the NYS Association for the Education of Young Children are providing guidance to support our youngest students, their families, teachers, and leaders by highlighting key features of high quality early childhood teaching. **We firmly believe that young students can best meet New York State Learning Standards when they have effective teachers who use intentional, experiential, and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.** This brief provides helpful strategies related to setting up a classroom environment that will help to put the State's young learners on a path to social and intellectual success as they master the foundational skills to meet the New York State Learning Standards.



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ASSESSMENT

Resources

- **New York State Education Department Assessment Guidance for Early Learning** (prekindergarten to grade 3) www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/
- **Preschool Assessment: A guide to Developing a Balanced Approach** National Institute for Early Education Research www.nieer.org/publications/policy-matters-policy-briefs/policy-brief-preschool-assessment-guide-developing
- **Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum** Diane Trister Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles, and Jessica Maiorca www.naeyc.org/yc/node/275
- **New York State Education Department** www.nysed.gov

Sources

- ¹ This section is guided by the recently published "New York State Education Department assessment guidance for early learning (prekindergarten to grade 3)." For the full guidance, please visit www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/
- ² Early Childhood Mapping Project Alberta. (2013) How the brain develops. Retrieved January 20, 2014, from www.ecmap.ca/Early-Childhood-Development/Pages/How-the-Brain-Develops.aspx
- ³ Snow, K. (2011). Developing kindergarten readiness and other large-scale assessment systems. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children. Retrieved February 6, 2014 from www.naeyc.org/resources/research/kreadinessassessment
- ⁴ Meisels, S. J., Bickel, D., Nicholson J., Xue, Y., & Atkins-Burnett, S. (2001). Trusting teacher judgments: A validity study of a curriculum-embedded performance assessment in kindergarten to grade 3. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(1), 73-95.
- ⁵ National Research Council. (2008). *Early childhood assessment: Why, what, and how?* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.



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Guidance from

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