

“Ugh, Assessment”

Discovering your children through Assessment

By Marcy Hemminger

Currently as a special education teacher, assessment is a big part of what I do for teaching and working with these unique children. For IEP's, frequent and consistent records are necessary. How else to get this information than through assessment? At first I was hesitant, even reluctant, to assess. Would that not burst the positive outlook that I had for my students? Would it reflect poorly on my teaching skills?

Over time though, mainly through repetition and experimentation on the various types of assessment, I found that the role assessment played in my classroom became a very positive one. It became one that I no longer dreaded, but valued and anticipated. How and why did this occur?

First, I discovered the differences as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the types of assessments. What is assessment? It is the “ongoing process that includes collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information about pupils, the classroom and their instruction.” (from NIEER, 2005) Assessment falls into two types or categories:

1. Formal

- Standardized – these are assessments that are the same for all. They have very specific directions and usually “scripts” that cannot be deviated from in any way. Here are some benefits:
 - Highly reliable
 - Free from teacher bias
 - Measures child against his/her peers
 - Has fixed parameters and is considered a valid form of testing

But CAUTION: Standardized tests are not really suited for young children, especially as a sole form of gathering data. These types of tests may not accurately reflect their skills as it is a brief snapshot of their performance or ability and should be used sparingly and in combination with other forms of assessment.

2. Informal

- Observations – these are assessments that can provide very personal information. As a teacher, you are watching and recording what each child actually does as they work and play in the classroom. Here are some benefits:
 - Intrude minimally
 - Help assess behavior and knowledge
 - Inexpensive

CAUTION: This form of assessment alone is not sufficient and needs to be supported by other types of assessment or information. Observations can also be very time intensive and teachers need training support to obtain accurate and reliable information.

- Portfolios – are a purposeful collection of student work that reflect a student's progress or acquisition of skills over time. It can include work samples, photographs and even video/audio recordings. Here are some benefits:
 - Documents the creativity of children
 - Most commonly used with young children
 - Encourages collaboration between teachers, children and parents

- Promotes ownership and motivation for the children

CAUTION: This form of assessment can be influenced by teacher bias, especially if the teacher is in control of what is collected. It is important for the children to be able to have input in what is saved as well. Pre-planning is critical for developing thorough portfolios so that it is a true and comprehensive collection of their skills.

- Ratings – Teacher/Parent/Student – this type of assessment is quick and easy to use once it has been developed. It tends to assess more general student characteristics. Report cards are a common form of a rating assessment. Here are some benefits:
 - Valuable input based on teacher experience
 - Organizes teachers' and parents' perceptions of child's development
 - Can involve the parents about the kinds of behaviors and milestones that are important for young learners

CAUTION here: These ratings may not provide specific information that reflects a child's true performance – it generally is either can/can't do something. It also may be affected by teacher bias and, unless specific criterion is established, perceptions of ability may be variable.

Second, I learned to consider why I wanted to assess and for whom I wanted the information presented. I found that it should be for one or more of the following reasons and to answer these types of questions:

- **Knowledge mastery** - Can the children recall the information I have presented?
- **Patterns of reasoning** - How did they figure out a solution to a new problem?
- **Performance skill** - Can they cut with scissors? Tie their shoes? Complete a puzzle?
- **Product development capabilities** - Can they put their knowledge together with a performance skill? Such as figuring out how to make a car out of a shoe box and completing the task.
- **Dispositions** - Are the children happy in school? Do they like to play outside? Are they frustrated when doing "writing" activities?

How I collect and report my findings should be based on who will review them. If it is for my knowledge for planning my next lessons or sharing the information with the child, checklists, brief notes and data collections sheets are adequate, but if I am making a presentation to my administration or for state records, charts, graphs and written reports may be necessary.

Finally, I discovered ways that it enhanced my teaching

- I developed a closer relationship with my students. Through assessment, I felt that I truly knew a child, what they were capable of, what their strengths and challenges were and what they were interested in. It gave me a personal relationship with each and every child.
- I developed closer relationship with the parents of my students. How wonderful it was for me to be able to talk knowledgeably with a parent about their child. How wonderful it was for the parent to realize that I did have an understanding about the gifts and challenges their child exhibited.
- It provided me a roadmap for developing lesson plans. Now I knew exactly what my students could do and what areas I needed to continue to provide opportunities for development or what areas we needed to offer next.
- It provided proof of the accomplishments for the students, the parents and even administrators. Parent conferences were no longer intimidating or dreaded because I had powerful and accurate information to share. It was able to move from opinions to facts. Especially in dealing with challenging behaviors or children that may need referrals for evaluation, I was able to provide

accurate information not biased by my feelings, but reflected what was truly happening, or not happening, in the classroom.

- I found it demonstrated my effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) in utilizing strategies for developing concepts and skills. If I noticed spurts of growth or even lack of growth in the acquisition of new skills, I could make an educated evaluation of what methods were working or not working to promote my desired outcomes. No more “wondering” if what I was doing was effective.

Making these realizations took the apprehension and fear out of assessments and not only improved the quality of my instruction and programming, but enabled me to look at my children in a different way; as unique and delightful individuals that looked to me for that gentle nudge along the path of their emotional and academic life. Now, I look forward to the information I obtain about my students, knowing that it provides so many benefits for me, my students and the parents of those amazing children.

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Resources:

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