CHAPTER 12

Assessment in Kindergarten

Meeting Children Where They Are

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Over the 20 years I have been a kindergarten teacher, assessment has changed dramatically. When I first began teaching, educators' observations and self-made assessments were honored as appropriate ways to document young children's growth and mastery. My colleagues and I used our own assessments and observations to plan instruction based on what our students needed. We had the flexibility to evaluate children in areas that were appropriate for them. For example, we could delay assessing reading skills if a child did not yet show an understanding of the difference between letters, words, and numbers.

Assessment in today's kindergarten classrooms, unfortunately, looks at times like what we would expect in upper-grade classrooms, with proctors and secure testing materials. Teachers are often not allowed to assess their own students (to protect the integrity of the results), and the results are sometimes used to measure teacher performance (whether or not the assessments have been designed and validated for use in high-stakes decisions).

Timed assessments and scripted directions, which must be read word for word, provide valuable information but offer no flexibility for young learners. Even when children are just beginning to learn English, I am required to assess them in English—according to the script, not to their needs. I have sat with many frustrated children, some near tears, as I asked them to read sight words during their second week of kindergarten. I will never forget the defeat on one child's face as she looked up at me with a quivering chin and said, "But I can't read." Despite how positive and nonchalant I tried to be during that assessment, assuring her that I did not expect her to read the words, the formal assessment experience affected this child's confidence and her excitement for learning.

It would be easy to have a sweeping negative view of assessments in the current climate. Like many teachers, I have felt dread when someone mentioned assessments. But I know that long before this age of high-stakes accountability, intentional teachers were developing and using assessments as appropriate, powerful tools in their toolboxes.

Intentional teachers gather data that are needed to guide instruction, ensuring that all children grow and learn at the right pace. They use assessments to find their students' strengths and to figure out which areas they need to target for early intervention. They use varying methods of observation and assessment to find out what young learners are able to do, so that they can help them progress. In this chapter I discuss varied strategies that are important for all young children, but especially for dual language learners (DLLs).

School and Classroom Background

I teach kindergarten in a rural, high-poverty school in North Carolina that has a diverse student population, including children who speak a language other than English at home and whose parents (and often other family members) are migrant workers, often coming from Mexico. Most of my DLL students live in homes where Spanish is the primary language; some children are learning both Spanish and a dialect of Mixtec at home, and these students communicate in Spanish (and in their emergent English) in the classroom. Many of our migrant families return to the area year after year during spring and early summer. These families travel up and down the East Coast, as well as to areas such as Michigan, to work in agriculture. My experiences as a teacher in this setting have shown me the importance of digging deeper to discover the

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strengths of my students, to provide opportunities for them to show what they know, beyond scripted or standardized assessments.

For many years I served as a North Carolina demonstration classroom teacher, which meant that my role extended beyond my classroom work with students. My classroom was open to teachers and other educators for professional development in the form of full-day guided observations. Although the official program is no longer up and running, I continue to have an open door to my classroom and have stayed connected to my fellow demonstration teachers as we strive to provide the most appropriate and engaging experiences for our young learners, including how to balance effective assessment practices.

Intentional Assessments Prevent Unintentional Errors

I often begin the school year with children who speak little to no English. These students struggle on our required early literacy assessment—the previously mentioned assessments that I am required to administer in English, word for word, in September—and are automatically labeled *at risk*. My colleagues and I are able to use the data from these assessments to help identify students who need more support and interventions in literacy skills. The danger with relying solely on scripted, inflexible assessments, however, is the labeling and grouping of children with a broad stroke. We might target skills based on these test results without fully realizing what our children need.

It would be easy for me to group all of these children who are "at risk" together in the same skill-based intervention group because they all have the same score on the reading assessment that focuses on book and print concepts. But for me, the mandated assessment is just the beginning. I dig deeper to find out what else I need to know to provide opportunities for growth for each of my students. I have learned valuable information by using my own observations and assessments to find the knowledge and skills the children *do* have. With book and print concept inventories from the works of literacy researcher Marie Clay (1993), along with my own very limited Spanish skills, I try to assess my Spanish-speaking students in their native language as much as possible.

Our school has been fortunate to have an English as a second language (ESL) teacher who speaks Spanish. She serves all of the emergent bilingual children at our K–5 school. I try to assess what I can using my limited Spanish skills and then use the ESL teacher as a resource to dig deeper when needed.

More Nuanced Assessments

Administering my own additional assessments with the children who had scored similarly on the book and print concepts assessment confirmed that a number of these children did not, in fact, know any print concepts. They were unfamiliar with holding a book, turning the pages, and using pictures to enhance meaning. It was evident they'd had very limited early literacy experiences, even in their home language. But I also found out that some of these students who were "at risk" *were* familiar with book and print concepts. My assessments showed that they understood the difference between the front and back of a book, knew the difference between print and pictures, tracked left to right when looking at the text, and looked closely at the pictures on each page. Some even knew that a period at the end of the sentence signifies a stop. Their at-risk scores on the required assessment were not representative of poor early literacy knowledge and skills, but rather, were indicative of their emerging English language skills. They clearly had engaged in many literacy experiences with their families before entering kindergarten. While all of these students had the same results on the mandated assessment, my more nuanced assessments provided valuable information that enabled me to target the children's very different needs.

To ensure that I have all necessary information, I begin each school year with informal checklists assessing children's alphabet and numeral recognition, knowledge of colors and shapes, and rote and object counting abilities. I have found that this is important for all of the children, not just the DLLs. For example, I often have students who speak only English who are not able to count past five or to identify basic colors and shapes. I observe and assess these children frequently in the first weeks and months of kindergarten to see if and to what extent they are making progress. That helps me determine whether their limited knowledge is due to lack of exposure to these concepts—a problem I can address—or

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whether there are other issues, such as cognitive or developmental delays, that would require additional assessments and supports by specialists.

One pitfall I have learned to watch out for is not giving my DLL students the same attention to their cognitive and developmental growth by solely focusing on their language acquisition. I once again gain valuable information by evaluating which DLLs can identify numbers, shapes, and colors in their first language and which children cannot. That way, I can provide struggling students with the same opportunities for individualized early interventions as their English-only peers, which may include early math interventions or speech articulation interventions. I do not let them slip through the cracks simply because of their limited English.

The ESL teacher, Ms. Worley, and I regularly share observations with each other. Her fluent Spanish skills allow her to find out more about our Spanish-speaking students' strengths and needs in their home language. While she focuses in Spanish and English on building the conceptual knowledge of the DLLs with the most challenges (and on determining whether additional supports are called for), I target English vocabulary with the students who already know basic shapes and colors in their first language.

Educators draw on a variety of developmentally appropriate assessment methods to gain a fuller picture of a child's development and learning.

Intentional Assessments Throughout the Day

Doing my own flexible assessments enables me to collect information about students that goes beyond the scripted, mandated assessments. I do observations and keep running records that allow me to look at each student as a whole child, including a child's approaches to learning, language development and communication, cognitive development, emotional and social development, and health and physical development.

What I find most useful is systematically observing children throughout the day in the natural learning environment. This practice, which all intentional teachers use, does not interrupt instruction and is valuable because it provides additional information about children beyond summative or diagnostic data. The challenge comes in recording or documenting what I learn from watching the children so that I can reflect on the information and use it to guide and differentiate instruction. Current technology aids in information gathering. Photos and videos are quick and easy ways to document student learning. Some free software platforms (such as Seesaw, available at https://web.seesaw.me) even empower children to use technology to document their learning. (The book *Digital Tools for Learning, Creating, and Thinking*, by Victoria Fantozzi [2022], has more ideas on ways children can do this.)

Assessing Children During Engaging Play

I have found that my classroom schedule and environment play a large role in my ability to collect data throughout the day. Large blocks of uninterrupted time, when children can play and make choices, set the stage for gathering meaningful information about each of my young learners. When children can choose where they are going to play, they tend to pick areas where they feel safe and experience some confidence. This is a great opportunity to observe their skills and strengths. *North Carolina Guide for the Early Years* states that "preschool and kindergarten children are more likely to perform at their best when engaged in interesting and meaningful classroom projects they choose themselves—such as real reading and writing activities rather than only skills testing" (Public Schools of North Carolina 2009, 79). Anecdotal notes, photos, and videos are useful for documenting children's abilities. They provide additional evidence, especially when children's oral language does not fully showcase their learning (NAEYC 2022). This may arise among both DLLs and monolingual English speakers, such as children with speech and language impairments or autism.

I have had several DLLs who were not able to retell a story in English. This was a concern because they would need to retell a simple story on the state reading assessment. One student, Alonso, stands out in my mind. Ms. Worley and I had been observing

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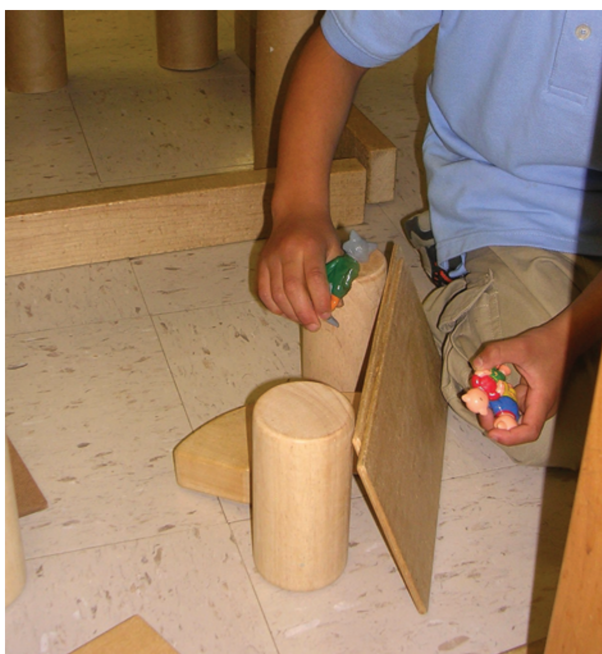
him closely for possible developmental delays that might be hidden by his limited English proficiency. Alonso could not orally retell familiar stories that we had read together over and over. It would have been easy to believe that he lacked an understanding of sense of story and that his receptive and productive language skills were lacking—possibly in both Spanish and English. Observing him during play provided me with valuable information that debunked these assumptions.

Alonso loved the block center and, even with limited English, was able to engage with his peers. He had confidence when playing in this center and felt comfortable taking risks. One time when he was in the block center, he built three small structures. When I asked him about the structures, he said they were the pig houses. I realized he was retelling *The Three Little Pigs*, a book we had been reading. I sat and observed Alonso as he used small wolf and pig figurines to act out the story, completely in order, including the beginning, middle, and ending.

Alonso used simple, key repetitive phrases in English from the story (such as "I'll huff and blow house down") and showed an understanding of character and setting. I knew then that his receptive language skills were stronger than I had thought and that, while he was not able to successfully retell a story orally with many details in English, he did in fact understand the story we'd read together and had a concept of story sequence. I updated Alonso's learning target to "building vocabulary in order to retell simple stories," replacing the assumed learning goal of sequencing stories. Because of my careful observations and record keeping of Alonso's engagement in play that was meaningful to him, I was better able to address his needs.



Another example of choice and play creating great opportunities for information gathering is when students play with their peers. When my DLLs play with peers who are bilingual, they show more confidence and I am then better able to observe their strengths. I recently observed a student who did not speak English playing a counting game with a bilingual peer; both were counting and conversing in Spanish. I listened to and saw their oral and object counting skills while they played. The student who was just beginning to learn English performed much better in this setting than he would have if I had called him over to a table and asked him to count. In the midst of play, he was not as self-aware or worried that he did not yet know how to count in English as he would have been if he were trying to answer my questions.

Asking Probing Questions

Early childhood educators are skilled at asking questions in different ways to find out what young learners know and understand. In many instances I've had to reframe questions asked by another staff member or an administrator so that my 5-year-old students comprehend what is being asked. Often the adult laughs and responds, "See, that's why you're the kindergarten teacher and I'm not!" Teachers must use this same skill when observing their students by intentionally reframing questions to elicit the information they are looking for. There are times when I can simply ask questions and use the children's oral responses as evidence of learning, but there are other times, especially with DLLs, when I must break apart the question or say, "Show me." As I listen to my students explain what they are showing me, I gain valuable insights.

Several resources that promote effective practices in early childhood classrooms have helped me plan and set up environments that lend themselves to assessing and questioning throughout the day. Many research-based and teacher-tested strategies can be found in both NAEYC's position statement (2020) and book (2022) on developmentally appropriate practice. The *North Carolina Play to Learn Center*

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Planning Guides and Posters (Public Schools of North Carolina 2023) is a collection of resources for planning center-based classrooms, including information on learning centers for art, block, books and listening, dramatic play, math, science, and writing. The planning guides explicitly describe how children may engage in each center and how intentional teachers can support their learning. They serve as a starting place for teachers to think about what types of skills are addressed and what types of data they could gather at different centers. The posters include standards for all development and learning domains that might be addressed when children are working in the centers. A quick glance at these standards serves as a reminder of how teachers can use centers as assessment tools. The posters also include several questions to ask, prompting teachers to use questioning as a way to gather information and promote learning. To access the planning guides and posters, visit www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/office-early-learning/kindergarten#PlaytoLearnCenterPlanningGuidesandPosters-3286.

You can also find examples of questions that extend children's thinking in the *North Carolina Guide for the Early Years* (Public Schools of North Carolina 2009; www.dpi.nc.gov/documents/publications/catalog/kg106-ncguide-early-years/open). This resource is

Questions to Promote Children's Thinking

Creative Arts

- How are these alike or different?
- Is there a pattern in this?
- What do you think should happen next?
- What would happen if . . . ?
- Which is . . . (e.g., larger or smaller, louder or softer, brighter or darker)?
- What can you tell me about your work?
- How did you feel when you heard/saw that?
- How is this . . . (e.g., shape, sound, movement, phrase) different from the other one?

Block Play

- What other block shape might work there?
- How did you decide to put all those blocks together?
- It looks like you are all out of the long blocks. What else could you use to fill up the same space?
- Tell me about your building.
- How will the firefighters get into your building?
- How will people know which way to drive their cars on the road?
- Which animals will live in each part of your zoo?

Science

- What do you suppose would happen if . . . ?
- Do you have any ideas about how we might begin?
- What will you do next?
- Why do you think that?
- How did you figure that out?
- What changes do you see? What has changed the most?
- How do you know?
- What characteristics do the . . . (e.g., flower, caterpillar) have that make it a . . . (e.g., plant, insect)?
- Can you draw a picture of your findings? Can you add some words?
- Which holds more: the tall, thin jar or the short, fat one?

Adapted from ~~the~~ *North Carolina Guide for the Early Years* (Public Schools of North Carolina 2009). Creative arts questions can be found on page 159, block center questions on page 139, and science questions on page 153 of that document.

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older and more extensive, with a full chapter dedicated to a different learning center and a list of associated questions. I have adapted the lists of questions to make small charts that detail ways to check for understanding and place them in each center in my classroom (see "Questions to Promote Children's Thinking" on the previous page for a few examples). They serve as reminders not just to me but to my teacher assistant, interns, and volunteers as well. For example, questions to promote children's thinking in the math center include "What other ways can we show that?" "How can we do this differently?" "Tell me how you did that" "Why do you think that?" and "Tell me how you figured that out." Over the years, this shift in thinking has allowed both my teacher assistant and me to focus on the *process* of learning—not just on our students' finished products. In the art center, for example, the teacher assistant and I both make comments such as "You worked really hard on that. How did you come up with that idea?" instead of something more general, such as "That's a beautiful painting." For teachers who are struggling with how to uncover their students' thinking and understanding, all of these resources are great places to start.

Conclusion

By focusing on flexible, ongoing, intentional assessments, teachers are better able to fully address their students' needs. My colleagues and I are ensuring that all of our young learners have the same opportunities to grow and succeed. My assessments allow me to focus on the children's strengths and dig deeper into their individual needs. This is true with all of my students and is especially true with my DLLs.

I hope that by sharing my experiences, I have motivated you to feel empowered to continue using a variety of formal and informal assessments as powerful tools in your toolbox. Step back when you feel overwhelmed by mandated assessments, particularly those that interrupt instructional time, and take inventory of the countless other ways you dig deeper to identify the strengths of your young students. They deserve nothing less.

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