

# Assessment for Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage

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## Introduction

This article provides a broad overview of the key principles of assessment for learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. It outlines the purposes of assessment and describes key approaches for collecting evidence of children's achievements. The article also identifies approaches for facilitating the involvement of both children and parents or carers within the assessment process.

## Formative assessment

Eaude (2011) states that 'Formative assessment is a process which seeks to enable children to know what to do next to enhance their learning' (p.145). Additionally Nutbrown (2001) stresses the importance of practitioners viewing assessment as a dynamic rather than a static process. Thus, assessments are most valuable when they effectively support teaching and promote learning. This should be an on-going process.

Observational assessment is central to current practice in the early years. It enables practitioners to gain detailed knowledge and understanding of what children know and can and facilitates the identification of 'next steps' in learning. This should inform the planning process so that activities and experiences can be designed to meet the specific and current needs of children. Effective practitioners draw upon their broad knowledge of children to enable them to identify development and learning needs. This information should inform the planning process and subsequent planning should carefully consider children's emerging learning needs, as well as their interests.

Formative assessment is often referred to as *assessment for learning*. This approach to assessment is supportive and celebrates each child's strengths across all areas of learning. All areas of learning are given equal importance within the early years and effective assessment helps to create a unique picture of the whole child. The process focuses on children's achievements and does not seek to label, judge or categorise children. Assessment for learning acknowledges the contributions of parents, carers and children to the assessment process and values the learning that takes place both within and outside of the setting. Within effective settings children and parents are constructed as partners within the process of assessment and are given opportunities to review learning and to identify next steps.

Observational assessment is the main approach to the assessment process in the early years. Observations provide practitioners with a wealth of information about

children's strengths and emerging learning needs across all areas of learning and children should be observed in both child-initiated and adult-led activities. Formative assessment should be planned into daily systems, but in addition, should also be spontaneous. Consequently, effective practitioners will note significant developments in children's learning as they participate in everyday activities.

An extended observation of children in the role play area can evidence many aspects of children's learning and development across all six areas of learning. However, the outcomes of such an assessment cannot be pre-determined. In contrast an observation of children's learning and development within a focused adult-led activity may evidence whether children have achieved specific pre-determined learning outcomes. Evidence for assessment should be generated as children participate in a range of everyday activities. Practitioners should provide children with a rich, stimulating and varied environment in which they can thrive and respond. Such contexts provide a wealth of opportunities to support and evidence learning and development across a broad and rich framework.

### **Opportunities for assessment**

Initially adults may support and scaffold learning to enable children to develop their confidence in gaining skills, knowledge and understanding. Following adult-led tasks, it is important for practitioners to consider how they can create opportunities for children to independently apply the learning without support. Provision areas in the setting can be enhanced to enable children to practise and apply new concepts and ideas. An example of this is where a practitioner introduces the children to a shape game using a feely bag. Individuals are asked to feel a shape in the bag and describe it to their peers. At this stage the practitioner plays an important role in introducing mathematical vocabulary related to two dimensional shapes. At a later date the feely bag can be placed in an appropriate area of provision for the children to access independently if they wish. This independent activity potentially provides a rich context for assessing children's development. The practitioner can observe children working independently and can note down what they say and do whilst playing with the shapes. The children may decide to change the focus of the game and this is acceptable and may also provide rich evidence of children's development. Such practices are only one way of accessing assessment information.

An additional source of rich assessment evidence is the practice of conducting longer observations of independent learning which focus on one child or a small group of children working in one or more areas of provision. Ideally video evidence should be collected and viewed at a later date by the practitioner. The footage can then be analysed by one or more practitioners and judgements relating to current achievement can often be made in relation to several areas of learning. In such

circumstances there may well be no identified focus for the observation but such practice frequently provides a wealth of rich information.

Incidental observations should also be a regular aspect of day-to-day practice. A child may have been supported over several weeks to manage clothes fastenings independently. Evidence of the child's ability to do this without support can be collected in the cloakroom, as the child dresses and undresses before and after physical activity or as the child supports peers with clothes fastenings.

A small proportion of assessment evidence will be collected during adult-initiated activities. Within these tasks, practitioners often have a clear focus for assessment. These often relate to intended learning outcomes or success criteria. These assessments enable practitioners to identify whether specific intended learning outcomes have been met by the child.

All observations should include contextual information relating to what the child did or said and the nature of the activity. This evidence should then be analysed in relation to *Development Matters* (DFES, 2007) in order to identify children's achievements and next steps in learning.

### **Identifying next steps**

Learning is most effective when it takes place in what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as *the Zone of Proximal Development*. This refers to the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can potentially achieve with support. Consequently planned learning opportunities and experiences should be pitched at a level slightly higher than the child's actual developmental level and children can be supported by practitioners, other adults or peers to achieve their proximal developmental level. Bruner used the term *scaffolding* to indicate that the level of support given is withdrawn when the child is independently able to master identified knowledge, skills and understanding (Wood 1998). When observing children it is of course essential to note their achievements but it is equally important to identify the ways in which current achievements can be built upon through carefully considered scaffolding techniques. These may include playing alongside children, modelling, questioning and explanations. Adult supported learning and independent learning provide opportunities for adult or peer-peer scaffolding.

The *Development Matters* strand of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework provides an overview of children's broad development. However, children do not necessarily progress sequentially through these. The identification of significant next steps emerges from a detailed knowledge of each child's actual development in specific areas of learning and their potential developmental level when given support. Children come to the task of learning from different starting points and

develop at different rates. A deep knowledge and understanding of each child is the key facilitator to identifying next steps for each learner.

### **Collecting and moderating evidence**

Evidence to support assessment judgments can be collected through the use of observations of children's learning in a range of contexts, photographs, videos, samples of recorded work, audio evidence and from conversations with children, parents or carers. Margaret Carr (2007) advocates the use of *Learning Stories*. This approach is reflected within *Te Whariki*, the New Zealand early years curriculum. Learning stories provide a powerful vehicle through which children's development can be documented over a period of time. They are written in an extended narrative style and provide contextual information relating to factors which may impact on the child's learning, as well as practitioner reflections on the child's development.

It is important that moderation processes are established in all settings to ensure that assessment judgments are accurate. Practitioners both within and between settings should participate within moderation processes to ensure consistency and reliability.

### **Involving parents and carers in the assessment process**

The notion of parents as partners is a key component of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. Pugh and De'Ath (1994) have produced a theoretical model of parental involvement which ranges from non-participation through to parental control, where parents determine and execute decisions. Six stages have been identified in this model:

- Non-participation
- Being there - *attending functions*
- Co-operation - *working within the learning environment under supervision*
- Collaboration- *involvement in the assessment and planning process*
- Partnership - *involvement in strategic planning*
- Control - *parents determine and execute decisions*

(Pugh and De'Ath, 1994)

According to the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework:

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.

(DFES, 2007)

Additionally the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Handbook states:

Assessment must actively engage parents and/or other primary carers, the first educators of children, or it will offer an incomplete picture. Accurate assessment requires a two-way flow of information between setting(s) and home and reviews of the child's achievements should include those demonstrated at home.

(QCA 2008:10)

Glazzard et al (2010) recommend documenting conversations with parents about children's holistic development. These can be included in the child's assessment portfolio. Additionally, the authors stress the importance of making learning visible to parents, for example through the use of photographs of children's learning on a rolling loop on the interactive whiteboard. These can be used to stimulate a conversation with parents about children's learning. Parental comments about their child's development can be included in each child's learning journey. Additionally, parents can be asked to document the learning that takes place outside of the setting through the use of short observations. Parental observations can then be included in children's learning journeys.

Parental contributions to an achievement wall are a valuable way of documenting the learning that takes place away from the setting (Glazzard et al 2010). It is important that practitioners recognise that the learning that takes place within the setting only provides a partial picture of what children know and can do. It is essential that practitioners value parental contributions to assessment as learning takes place everywhere.

Involving parents and carers in assessment will present challenges. Some parents will be reluctant to participate, some will see assessment as an aspect of practice which should only be carried out by professionals and questions may be raised about the reliability of parental assessments. However, where assessments include parental contributions, a full picture of the child's development can be created. Some parents and carers will become keen partners in the assessment process so it is important to develop systems to facilitate this, even if some do not engage.

### **Children as partners in assessment**

According to Hutchin (2007), 'Children must be involved in their own assessment and their voices heard, regardless of age or ability' (p.72). Hutchin (2007) stresses that involving children in the assessment process demonstrates respect for children's rights and helps them to understand their achievements and learning needs. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that:

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own opinion the right to express these views freely in all matters affecting the

child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

(United Nations, 1989)

The Coram Family *Listening to Young Children* Materials focused on a range of strategies to enable practitioners to elicit the perspectives of children. These materials were developed in response to a research project on listening to children (Clark and Moss, 2001). The research emphasised that children should be viewed as experts within their own learning and identified the need to encourage children to express their views through verbal and non-verbal means. This could include the use of signing, picture exchange communication and photographs taken by the children of things that they consider to be significant. The different pieces of evidence fit together like the pieces in a mosaic and consequently this is known as the *Mosaic Approach*. This approach views children as social agents and gives ownership of the learning process to the children.

The Reggio Emilia approach, founded in northern Italy by Malaguzzi, emphasises the importance of listening to children's ideas. Children are viewed as capable partners in their own learning and practitioners and children work in collaboration. Within this approach the views of children are greatly valued. Malaguzzi emphasised that ninety eight of the one hundred languages that children are born with are lost by the age of six. Practitioners should therefore ensure that learning is evidenced in a range of ways and that young children participate in the process of gathering and selecting evidence for inclusion in assessment portfolios.

Periodically we recommend that informal *learning conversations* take place between practitioners and children. These provide an opportunity to review the assessment evidence in learning journeys and to collect children's responses to their learning to date. These conversations also provide children with an opportunity to reflect on their interests, strengths and future learning needs. Such conversations should be recorded and included in individual learning journeys.

### **Summative assessment**

The *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Handbook* (QCA, 2008) states that although adult-led activities are 'a key element of practice in EYFS settings, practitioners need to ensure that no more than 20 per cent of the total evidence for each scale point is gained from this type of activity' (p.12). The profile is a summary of each child's achievements at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and each strand of learning is assessed on a nine point scale. The final judgments on the profile should be informed by practitioners' knowledge of each child and the on-going formative assessment which has taken place during the Foundation Stage. We argue that the profile can also be used in a formative way to inform teaching and

learning in Key Stage 1. Additionally, some children will still need the breadth of experiences provided by the Early Years Foundation Stage framework in Year 1 and will not be ready to start the National Curriculum. A rich and stimulating play-based learning environment, combined with adult-led tasks and observational assessment, is the most inclusive learning environment for children in Year 1 and will help children to thrive, thus facilitating a seamless transition.

## **Conclusion**

This article has emphasised the importance of viewing children and parents or carers as partners within the assessment process. Practitioners should develop systems to collect the voices of these key stakeholders about children's development and these voices should be documented in children's assessment portfolios or learning journeys. Allowing children to express their views about their development demonstrates a commitment to the principle of child voice and embraces the notion as children as social agents. It is a rights issue and recognises that children have a right to express their views, to be listened to and to have their views acted upon. Giving parents and carers ownership of the assessment process challenges traditional power hierarchies within schools and settings. Additionally, it recognises children as holistic learners and values the learning which takes place both within and outside the setting. The inclusion of the voices of children and parents or carers within the assessment process is democratic and provides practitioners with rich and deep information which helps practitioners to form a full picture of children as learners.

The challenges of developing effective assessment are many. It can be time consuming, onerous and bureaucratic. However practitioners should focus on the use of assessment to identify current achievements, next steps in learning and to inform subsequent planning. This process will help practitioners to advance children's development and enable them to achieve their potential.

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