


# Innovations AND PERSPECTIVES

**VCU**Virginia Department of Education's  
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## What can we learn from children's play? Using authentic assessment in the early childhood classroom

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Authentic assessment can be used in the early childhood classroom each day as children interact with one another in play scenarios and learning center areas. Opportunities are abundant for teachers to capture learning as it takes place in the context of a young child's typical daily routine. By interacting with their peers through role play and using open-ended materials and props, children begin to demonstrate many of the skills and concepts they have mastered. In our last *Innovations and Perspectives* publication, we explored the value of children's play and the rich learning that takes place. In this article, we will explore how, when, and what to focus on to capture children's developmental progress.

### What is authentic assessment and what are the benefits?

Assessment has long been defined as the process of observing, recording, and documenting what, how and when children demonstrate skills and concepts. When teachers are observing children to learn more about their development, the best context is somewhere familiar and authentic such as the children's classroom within their daily routine (McAfee & Leong, 2013). Authentic assessment allows teachers to "capture"

what developmental checklists,

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Observing and documenting children's play provides a teacher with an understanding of how children in the classroom construct knowledge.

rubrics, and some assessments do not—the children's thinking and learning processes. By using authentic assessment, we are able to observe children as they function in their regular daily routine and identify their strengths as well as their weaknesses (Bagnato, Neisworth & Pretti-Frontczak, 2010). Authentic assessment includes the many tools that provide a more accurate representation of development and learning, including work samples with teacher narratives, child

portfolios, photographs, learning stories that capture learning through photographs, videotapes, and anecdotal documentation.

One important benefit of authentic assessment is that it does not disrupt children's learning because it is completed throughout the children's regular daily routine. This type of assessment serves to inform the teaching and learning process in a way that allows teachers to also give feedback to children on their learning that is individualized. For example, when teachers participate in and facilitate children's play, they ask open-ended questions related to what the child is currently doing. This questioning requires critical thinking on the part of the child that may not be captured in a traditional assessment. Children demonstrate learning at this stage of their development by experimenting with manipulatives and other hands-on materials in a very concrete manner. An additional benefit of authentic assessment is that it allows teachers to be sensitive to individual differences, including children with disabilities, cultural differences, and children with different background experiences (McAfee & Leong, 2010).

#### **When should we plan to use authentic assessment?**

Teachers should use it daily. When I was a teacher of four and five year olds, I intentionally tried to observe children every day. This method (direct observation) followed by anecdotal record-keeping, allowed me to see the children "in process" instead of just looking at pre and post learning outcomes. It allowed me to examine how

students who are deaf or hard of hearing

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a child was processing and making connections to previous knowledge and background experiences. I reflected on the various parts of the day where children were “demonstrating” what they were learning and how they were thinking. This led me to focus on observing the children when they are participating in learning centers – a time when they were free to select materials, peers, and methods for play. I wanted to use multiple sources of information when assessing children, so I began with anecdotal notes. From there I moved to audio and video taping, collecting work samples for their portfolios, and lastly creating documentation and display panel boards that could serve as “evidence” to the families of the learning that occurred over time in our classroom.

#### **What can we look for when taking anecdotal notes during children’s play?**

I began by taking anecdotal notes that were factual, objective descriptions of what a child has done. This strategy allows teachers to review progress over time (by denoting the date), the context (when it occurs within the daily routine), and peer involvement. Persistence to task, attention span, use of trial and error, taking risks, language use between peers, and the use of symbolic representation are some competencies that can be observed when children play in learning centers.

The block center is a popular choice in classrooms where much learning across the content areas can be found. Children feel comfortable representing what they know when using blocks and can often demonstrate their thinking process as well. They talk to peers, plan and incorporate literacy tools (e.g., traffic signs, building storefronts), and may create or draw additional accessories to enhance their play. Skills to look for in the block center are the children’s persistence to task, involvement level, risk taking, use of trial and error techniques and the roles that children assume during play. When playing with blocks, teachers may also observe the child’s understanding of shapes, measurement, sorting/categorizing, quantity, gravity, weight, balance and momentum (Gronlund, 2013). Additional skills to observe as they build and create include children’s use of fine and gross motor skills, creative skills and thinking skills.

#### **How can we structure the learning center areas to heighten opportunities for concept and skill development during play?**

In the dramatic play center, children may attempt to recreate a “train station” after they listened to the teacher read a book on trains. The teacher can put dress-up materials (train hats and clothes) in the dramatic play center. The teacher might suggest additional ideas to extend their learning. If the children limited their role play solely to conductor and passengers, the teacher can suggest additional roles for the train

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workers such as the engineer, stocker and café' attendant, and stoker. With these additional roles, children could be challenged with math problems such as measuring luggage to see if it will fit on the train compartment, how much they would have to pay for a ticket, how many people can fit on the train, and how long will it take to get to their destination. The teacher may also add some open-materials to the dramatic play and block area such as cardboard boxes of different sizes, paper towel tubes, and large sheets of paper for making luggage and conductor hats. Literacy skills might include drawing and labeling routes, writing tickets, and developing menus for the café. When using multipurpose props, children must also use more language to explain to the other children in the group what the prop is and how it will be used. All of these activities lead to more complex play with greater opportunities for developing math and literacy skills. Teachers may utilize the information collected to plan future experiences that utilize open-ended props in the dramatic play and block areas, expand on the number of roles associated with the children's play, and to help children "plan" before they select a learning center (Bodrova & Leong, 2013).

The work of Sara Smilansky (Isbell, 2008) offers teachers a way to observe children in the dramatic play center. She suggests observing individual children for ten minutes at a time and recording the following: role play, using props, make believe, time, verbal communication, and interaction with peers. Within each of these categories, she developed a continuum along which children demonstrate their abilities. For example, during "verbal communication", teachers would record if children displayed "little verbalization" "talk focused on props," or "conversation with others about play and roles". This allows teachers to easily denote where children currently are in their verbal communication instead of using other methods of observation which were more laborious.

#### **How can we use video and recordings?**

Current technology (e.g., I-phones, I-pads, flip cameras,) allows us to record "replay" the observation, with a specific focus for detail that other methods do not provide. This method also supplies the teacher with additional information that may be missed when observing and making anecdotal notes. While filming children's play, their conversations can provide insight into children's social skills and turn taking abilities (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Teachers may also reflect on their involvement level in the play scenario and what they might do differently the next time they engage in play scenarios with the children. Some ideas for planning could be to incorporate more "how" and "why" questions with the children, extending the children's length of time in

the play area by suggesting new roles, or changing out the materials in the center because children have lost interest.

### **How can we use work samples and portfolios?**

Work samples and portfolios offer another look into children's progress. Decisions must be made on what to collect. Work samples may demonstrate the length of time a child was on task to complete an activity, the range and variety of materials used, and significant work products of the child. All three of these examples will provide information about the child. They can be collected over time and placed in an individual portfolio for each child. A variety of materials that can be collected include photographs, writing samples, cutting attempts, dictated stories, and drawings. After reviewing the work samples, teachers may plan for play and determine the need to rotate the art materials to include a greater variety of collage materials and provide puzzles of a greater difficulty for this particular child.

### **How can we use photography and documentation panels?**

Although a picture may be worth a thousand words, the narrative descriptions that accompany pictures can help us to see the learning that takes place – and specifically what took place before and after the picture was taken. The Reggio Emilia approach focuses on using documentation panels and learning stories to highlight children's thoughts and experiences in the course of the child's "research" about a particular topic (Scheinfield, Haigh, & Scheinfeld, 2008). Children's work is recorded at several different stages, including comments the children made after viewing the pictures that were taken. This process allows teachers to see how children "interpret" their own experiences. Regardless of the curriculum used, by focusing on documenting what the children are doing when they play, this helps teachers to tune in to each child's thought process as they make decisions, problem solve, and create during their play (McAfee & Leong, 2010).

### **What about observing and planning for children with disabilities and other special needs in my classroom?**

Just as with typically developing children, teachers must first observe to see which learning center areas and activities interest the child. We know children with disabilities and children who are learning English as a second language may have difficulty participating in play activities (Bagnato, et al., 2010). During play, children may use non-verbal cues and gestures to communicate with their peers (Nell & Drew, 2013).



Teachers may need to create additional environmental supports (e.g., photographs, pictures, visual tools) and adapt materials (using Velcro straps for dress up clothes and wrist straps for musical instruments). By starting with children's preferences, the teacher may simplify a play activity by breaking it down into smaller steps. Engaging the child with familiar toys and materials (e.g., trains, balls, dinosaurs) throughout learning center areas in the classroom is a planning strategy that teachers may use. Teachers may join in more frequently in the play scenario for a child with a disability and also use peer-to-peer modeling to help the child join in the play scenario.

### **How do I get started with authentic assessment?**

To get started with authentic assessment, teachers must have a system in place for observing, documenting, organizing, reflecting, analyzing and utilizing the information collected (Jablon, Dombro & Dichtelmiller, 2013). This plan should be shared with other adults working in the classroom. Initially, teachers must determine how frequently observations will take place. The teacher may begin with small timeframes (such as 10 minutes) to become comfortable with the process of observation and documentation. The teacher will need to determine where to position herself in the learning center areas to hear the children without distracting them. Beginning with small timeframes daily and then increasing the amount of time allows teachers to develop a regular routine habit of observing children. Materials for documentation can be index cards, sticky notes, or computer labels. A notebook for individual documentations for each child can be readily available in the classroom. By having a page in the notebook for each child, teachers can quickly identify children they have not observed in a current week to ensure they observe that child during the upcoming week.

An initial focus for observation can be something open-ended such as the purposeful use of materials in the different learning center areas in the classroom. This can let a teacher know if children are not using certain materials which might indicate a need for teacher facilitation of the materials. By indicating this focus in lesson plans, teachers will be intentional in their participation during learning center time. If children are misusing materials (e.g., throwing play food in the dramatic play center), it may indicate a need for rotation of materials as the children may be bored with the existing materials. There will also be times when teachers observe behaviors or skills/concepts spontaneously which include important information to document. By reviewing documentation weekly, teachers can reflect and make any necessary adjustments in their lesson plans, including areas for individualization and accommodations needed for individual children (Gronlund, 2013).

*The Milestones of Child Development: Virginia's Early Childhood Development Project (2010)* and *Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning Comprehensive Standards for Four Year Olds (2013)* are resources that provide teachers with valuable knowledge of what children should be learning in the early years. These resources cover major growth and developmental domains including content areas. Before conducting authentic assessments, teachers should be familiar with these resources and refer to them regularly throughout the year to remain grounded in realistic expectations for the young children in their classroom.

### **How can authentic assessment inform our teaching practices?**

Documentation of children's play provides teachers with rich information and an understanding of how each child in their classroom constructs knowledge. No single source of information will produce an accurate portrayal of a child's growth and development (McAfee & Leong, 2010). Authentic assessment is based on multiple sources of information that have taken place within the context of the child's natural routine and learning center environment over time. By collecting and reflecting on multiple sources of information, teachers can accurately capture the development of the whole child who is growing and changing rapidly.

Authentic assessment provides teachers with information for planning and facilitating children's play to include content specific experiences for math, literacy and social studies. Teachers should consider placing materials (such as writing materials and books) in all of the learning center areas to stimulate literacy activities. Materials can provide flexibility of play (open-ended) and promote creativity. Teachers must remain aware of children's active engagement in their play in order to determine timeframes for changing materials and developing new ideas that appeal to children. Teachers can look closely to find ways to plan and support children in problem solving activities.

With authentic assessment, teachers view individual children from a strengths-based perspective, incorporating their individual interests and unique qualities. These observations assist teachers to design and develop classroom environments and select activities to scaffold each child's learning. When done with intentionality, authentic assessment helps teachers create the link between assessment and developmentally appropriate curriculum.

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