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The **Kindergarten Interest Forum** is for early childhood education professionals committed to the well-being of kindergartners. Forum members believe in the critical importance of kindergarten education and support high-quality programs that provide developmentally appropriate experiences for children.

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Mrs. Wasserman, the kindergarten teacher in the vignettes, is based on Kim's classroom experiences.

ON OUR MINDS appears in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.



Joyful Learning and Assessment in Kindergarten

THE BAR FOR TODAY'S KINDERGARTEN has been raised. With more children enrolled in prekindergarten programs and state academic kindergarten standards becoming more prevalent, expectations for both kindergarten children and their teachers have risen (Graue 2006). Since 2001–02 the total enrollment for state-funded prekindergartens has increased by 73 percent for 4-year-olds and 45 percent for 3-year-olds. More than 80 percent of all 4-year-olds attend some kind of pre-K program (NIEER 2008). In addition, over the last 30 years a trend has developed to establish an earlier-in-the-year cutoff date for kindergarten entry (Colasanti 2007). In 1975, 9 states required children to have turned age 5 by September or earlier to enter kindergarten; in 1990, 28 states made this a requirement; and by 2005, 33 states had made the requirement.

Entering a kindergarten classroom today, we are more likely to see academically oriented teacher-directed instruction than active learning based on socialization, imagination, and creativity. The kindergarten curriculum now emphasizes content-oriented, skill-based learning that teachers assess with conventional measures such as worksheets or other paper-and-pencil tests to determine what skills or knowledge children have attained.

Kindergarten is looking more and more like the primary grades, yet the fundamental developmental characteristics of kindergartners and how they construct knowl-

edge, problem solve, and interact socially have not changed. And although teachers often assess children as if they should all know the same things at the same time, the fact remains that not all kindergartners learn at the same rate or in the same way (Berk 2006; Tominson 2009).

Many early childhood professionals blame assessment for inappropriate practices in kindergarten.

Some teachers “teach to the test”—meaning that they focus only on those areas in which children will be tested. Others rely on drill and practice to ensure that children’s performance on tests meet predetermined standards, whether appropriate or not.

But assessment doesn’t have to be that way. Developmentally appropriate assessment can be a means of maintaining and regaining joyful learning. Assessment can inform teaching so that developmentally and culturally appropriate practices are preserved *and* academic standards

are met (Gullo 2006). What follow are some assessment guidelines and examples of actual classroom practices that demonstrate how assessment can ensure accountability in an atmosphere of joyful learning.

Assessment is a continuous process.

Ideally, assessment describes the progress of a child’s learning not just after a single test but over time. There is no beginning, middle, or end to learning, so it follows

According to Webster, *joyful* means “experiencing well-being, success, or good fortune.” We who touch the lives of young learners believe that children deserve kindergarten experiences that foster a sense of well-being; that all children should experience success; and that all children must have opportunities for good fortune—all this, while making certain that all kindergartners meet the academic standards that foster future school and personal success.



that assessment of children's learning should not be limited to measurement only at the end of an instructional unit. It is important that we identify the learning sequences that children are mastering. We should also recognize that children progress *individually* through learning sequences. Learning is a continuum, and assessment can help teachers identify where each child is on this continuum. The following vignette describes how a kindergarten teacher uses her awareness of children's learning to assess their understanding of pattern construction over time and in multiple ways.

As Charles and Vamsi skip into their kindergarten classroom, they see the Question of the Day has to do with constructing an AABB pattern. Last week their teacher, Mrs. Wasserman, introduced the idea of AABB patterning to the class with a game that involved stacking color blocks, followed by a guided discovery lesson on creating AABB train cars with Unifix cubes. Since then, Mrs. Wasserman has reinforced the notion of patterning through a variety of engaging and enjoyable experiences, such as organizing the children in AABB patterns of boy–boy–girl–girl. She is careful to informally jot down on sticky notes and

blank computer labels her observations about the many ways the children demonstrate their knowledge about patterning. Later, she transfers this information into each child's math-learning portfolio to document progress toward mastery.

In this vignette, as Mrs. Wasserman observes these activities, she assesses the kindergartners' knowledge of the newly introduced concept. She uses frequent, embedded assessments to guide instruction and monitor progress. Mrs. Wasserman understands instructional sequences and is acutely aware of the continuum of learning in each curricular area. In her classroom, assessment forms the basis for education decision making. She learns about children's progress and needs through her observations. She selects materials that match various learning styles and developmental levels, with the hope of aligning the curriculum content and instructional strategies with children's success.

Assessment is a comprehensive process. It can measure many aspects of learning. How well does a kindergartner understand patterning? How does she use what she has learned about patterns as she arranges colored blocks? Can she

apply what she has learned to other situations? Assessing only in one way or in one context does not tell us the whole story. We need to consider the many ways children learn and the many ways they can show what they know. In the following vignette, Mrs. Wasserman continues to assess children's understanding of patterning, demonstrating how varied assessment contexts and procedures add to her understanding of children's learning.

Whenever possible, Mrs. Wasserman uses naturalistic assessment procedures when she observes children in classroom learning settings. She asks each kindergartner to create a unique ABAB pattern using cutout shapes. She notices Vamsi asking a peer, "What is an ABAB pattern?" During Discovery Time, she invites Vamsi and a few other children to the Math and More Center to explore pattern blocks. After Vamsi spends time with varied manipulative materials that invite "messing around," Mrs. Wasserman steps in to facilitate his increased understanding about patterns. As they sort and transform several patterns, she asks open-ended questions (such as, "How are these two patterns different?") to encourage Vamsi to create a variety of ABAB patterns.

Days later, during Discovery Time, Mrs. Wasserman makes note of several ABAB patterns that Vamsi created with multicultural figures as he "pattern chatted" with himself at the sand table. Then, she overhears him tell a classmate that the lunch line is an ABAB pattern of boy–girl–boy–girl–boy–girl. After observing several examples of Vamsi's mastery of the ABAB pattern, Mrs. Wasserman is now confident that he has a basic foundation for the concept and is ready for the next level of sequenced learning.

Assessment is an integrative process. The curriculum's stated learning goals should guide our assessment process. Ideally, children should be assessed while engaged in the process of learning. This results in two benefits: (1) teachers can use assess-

Learning is a continuum, and assessment can help teachers identify where each child is on this continuum.

Maintaining academic standards in kindergarten does not mean sacrificing developmentally appropriate teaching. Appropriate assessment can lead to joyful learning and joyful teaching.

ments as tools to modify the curriculum to meet individual children's strengths and needs; and (2) teachers can use assessments as a measure of curriculum effectiveness. Below, Mrs. Wasserman shows how she assesses children while they are learning and how she uses this information to guide future planning.

In Mrs. Wasserman's class, Together Time is a daily experience that brings the children together to connect, respond, share, and react to various topics of conversation and exploration. Today the children will play Guess My Pattern. Mrs. Wasserman separates the children into small groups and hands each group a specific pattern to create by using their bodies. The first group of giggling 5-year-olds brainstorm and begins building an AABB pattern: one-color shirt—one-color shirt—multicolored shirt—multicolored shirt. At their turn, the children enlist four additional classmates to join them and continue the pattern. At first the other children are stumped. Then Jasmeka exclaims, "I know! I know! I see an AABBAABB pattern! Can you see it? It is plain shirt—plain shirt—lots-of-colors shirt—lots-of-colors shirt . . . That's a super tricky one!"

In this vignette, Mrs. Wasserman plans activities that respond to her kindergartners' interests, experiences, and skills and at the same time confirm that her curriculum is effective. She gathers data to drive instruction by asking thought-provoking questions that extend children's interest, thinking, and learning. Observation, careful questioning, respectful listening, and detailed record keeping give her insight into each child's capabilities. She seizes teachable moments to create a springboard for future instruction and to reinforce children's

progress along the continuum of comprehension.

Learning is personal, active, and genuine; *discovery* invites mastery and empowerment; *delight* feeds passion and a quest for more; and *determination* nurtures confidence and creates a sense that learning is forever.

It is possible for kindergartners to experience success and well-being as they learn the things that will foster both school and personal achievement. A joyful kindergarten does not mean that academic standards are not being met. Maintaining academic standards in kindergarten does not mean sacrificing developmentally appropriate teaching. Appropriate assessment

can lead to joyful learning *and* joyful teaching.

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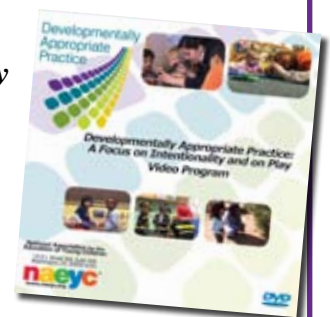
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