



# Assessment in Early Years Education

Rekha Sharma Sen & Shruti Bhargava



## Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of the education process. For most of us the word 'assessment' conjures images of an examination hall, marks and report card, and the look of dissatisfaction on the face of the elders as our marks often never matched the expectation they had of us. Fear and insecurity would perhaps be the emotions most commonly associated with the word 'assessment'. This picture of assessment is a consequence of a product oriented approach to education which sees education as the means to slot a large number of individuals into a few neat categories – bright, average, dull or intelligent, average, failure. These labels, awarded early, become self-fulfilling and stick with the individual for the rest of her life, influencing her approach to tasks even when she is out of the education system, so to say. Education, instead of being a process of empowerment, divests the individual of self confidence and self esteem. And this process begins right from the early years education in a pre-school.

Among the many things that need to be done in order to make the years of schooling meaningful and pleasurable for the child, a relook at the concept of assessment is necessary - this would involve redefining the purpose of assessment and rethinking the methods used for assessment.

## Purpose of Assessment

Narrowly conceptualized, assessment is a means of finding out what the child has learnt and the progress the child has made from one point of time to another. While this record of the individual child's progress is an important purpose of assessment, this is not the only purpose.

Equally important, the purpose of assessment is to gauge the effectiveness of the teacher's transaction of the curriculum and whether the teaching strategies used have been appropriate. One of the

ways of improving teaching-learning processes in the classroom is to find out how well the children have learnt what they were expected to learn. Such a conceptualization shifts the onus of learning from only the student to both the child and the teacher. Not only should the child learn but the teacher should teach in a way that the child is able to learn. If assessment indicates that a child has not learnt as well as the child should have, then the implication is as much, if not more, for the teacher to introspect about the nature of the teaching and to plan teaching-learning situations in a more suitable way, as it is to locate the reasons within the child.

Even when assessment is being done with the purpose of determining the child's progress, it needs to move beyond merely providing a record of child's performance at a point in time. The assessment results have to be used to support and improve every child's learning and development. They need to be used to individualize the teaching in accordance with each child's needs. Some children may have special needs and requirements which have to be met through use of specialized equipments and teaching strategies. Thus, assessment is not simply a record of performance of a group. The relationship between teaching, learning and assessment is cyclical – they feed into each other. As we teach we need to assess what the child has learnt. The assessment then tells us how we need to adapt our teaching to enhance the child's learning.

The parents are stakeholders in the education of their child. Assessment is a means of communicating to them the progress of their child and to make them partners in their child's learning by encouraging them to supplement the learning in the school at home.

From the perspective of the child, the assessment must generate a feeling of self-worth,

self- confidence and accomplishment in contrast with feelings of fear, tension and incompetence. It must elevate the child in her own eyes and must motivate her to continue in her quest for self-improvement. A young child will not be able to articulate this thought or indeed even be aware of it – however an assessment which empowers is reflected in the daily eagerness of the child to come to school, in the sparkle in her eyes and in the willingness to try out the new and the challenging.

Assessment should be an integral part of every program, benefit children, be used to make appropriate changes in curriculum and instruction, and to evaluate the worth of a program. The purpose of assessment is not to exclude, segregate or retain children.

### **The Nature of Assessment**

Indian education system is dominated by focus on assessment of academic achievement. Such an assessment values only a fragment of the child's total personality. It is not even a holistic assessment of the child's cognitive abilities. At all times, and in early years education specially, assessment must be concerned with the development of the child in all domains – physical, motor, cognitive, language and socio-emotional. How a child responds to another who snatches her toy is as important to note as whether she knows the names of colours. In addition, the assessment must provide a picture of the child's likes, dislikes and interest areas. Such an assessment would be a comprehensive assessment.

Assessment must be planned with the child as the focus and not the teacher. Paper and pencil tests performed within a limited time duration are perhaps convenient for the adults to administer and evaluate but they do not do justice to the child's range of potential. A one-time assessment in a situation often made fearful by the very manner in which it is carried out is unlikely to enable the child to put forth his best. Instead, assessment needs to be spread out over a period of time in order to capture a holistic record of the child's progress, should focus on different dimension of development and the child's personality, and should be individualized to cater to each child's needs, pace and style of learning. Assessment needs to be a continuous process with daily as well as periodic records maintained every 3-4 months.

### **Sources, Methods and Techniques of Assessment**

Since learning is not confined to the hours that the child spends in school, assessment has to be based on information about the child from multiple sources. The teacher is the obvious source of information that immediately comes to mind when we think of assessment, but other than teachers the child's parents, members of his community/ neighbourhood, the child's friends and peers and the child herself can provide valuable information about the child's development and learning. When assessment is done involving all of these people, one gets a holistic picture about the child.

Assessment can be done using one or a combination of the four methods – individual assessment, group assessment, child assessment and peer assessment. In case of the young child, the latter two may not be as feasible. During individual assessment, the teacher focuses on one child doing a task and records the individual child's accomplishments. We are all familiar with this method as assessment since it is most commonly used. During group assessment the teacher records how a group of children work together on a task in order to complete it. This method of assessment is suitable when we want to assess social skills, values and attitudes. During self-assessment the child reports on his own progress while in peer assessment other children provide information about the child's abilities, interest and knowledge.

The most commonly used technique of assessment in schools is paper and pencil tasks and oral tests. These are used even with the very young children. In many nursery schools, children take a written test writing 'A to Z' or '1 to 20'. Oral test may involve recitation of a poem or the alphabet or numbers. This method has many limitations and especially so when used for assessment of young children. The test like atmosphere creates an artificial setting, breeds nervousness in the child which can hamper the child's output. Such an assessment is not child friendly. Especially for assessing the learning and development of the young child this is not the method of choice. Instead, methods such as observing children in their natural setting as they go about their day to day activities and review of daily work done by children in the class or at home such as their drawings and other articles made by children (such as with clay), provide a more

complete information about the child. When such techniques are used for assessing the child, one gets a glimpse of the child's natural development. Teacher observations and portfolio method are less intrusive and more comprehensive as compared to one shot tests. Assessment needs to be valid, encompass the whole child, be continuous over time and use a variety of methods.

### **Observation as a Key Assessment Method**

The most common way of gathering information about children is by watching and listening to them. All teachers observe children they work with. These observations could be informal or intuitive or systematic, planned and focused. There are several ways of observing children which enable collection of authentic and meaningful data.

### **Observation as a method of assessment serves many purposes -**

- Helps teachers identify children's interests which enables the teacher to plan educational experiences which are in line with children's interest and thus may generate more extensive learning.
- Helps to identify the developmental level of each child in each of the domains - Children in a group would be at different developmental levels in differing domains. Observations conducted at different times and in varied settings using different techniques of observation has the potential to give a well-rounded picture of each child's development. This information would help the teacher to individualize instruction and care giving.
- Periodic observations help to keep track of children's progress - A systematic schedule of observations assists in documenting changes in child's or children's behavior.
- Observation is an effective technique for teachers to evaluate their own teaching practices and can provide insights into staff strengths and weakness. This in turn can help plan programs for professional development.
- Observation gives insights into general program as well as specific issues in the class. Written observations on individual children can be added to other information being shared with parents and administrators.

### **How to do Observations in Early Childhood Settings**

When observers enter any environment just their presence may change what might otherwise go on there. Young children fortunately adapt fairly quickly and if it is a known person then they revert back to their typical behavior and ignore the observer. Being unobtrusive is what one should aim for in an observation setting. This is possible if -

- Observation has been planned in advance
- Different observation methods are known and the appropriate method used in a particular situation
- There is clarity about the goals for the observation and the kind of information required
- A schedule has been worked out for whom to observe when
- Equipment such as recorders, stop watches, tape recorder, camera, video camera etc are available.
- The observer locates a position for observing which is unobtrusive. Select a place that allows full view and hearing but does not interfere with what you are trying to observe.

While observing and recording data, be as objective as possible. Suspend judgments, conclusions and other interpretations of meaning until after observation. Focus observation on a specific child behavior, situation, and concerned goal - it is not possible to see everything at once. Record the context of the observation and observe both verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

### **Methods for recording observations of young children**

Observations need to be recorded manually or tape recorded so as not to miss out on information. Just watching children is not enough, there has to be some ways to record what is being seen. It can be difficult to remember and analyze what has been observed and so a variety of methods are needed to document the observations.

- A reflective diary/journal/log - this is a written narrative about a child's/children's development with focus on a particular behavior or all development domains. Such a written record helps to track development over a period of

time. Though it is time consuming, it provides in-depth information. While a diary can be written at anytime and anywhere, it is best to write the observation as soon as the behaviour occurs.

- Audio Recording - In order to assess children's verbal skills, audio records of children's verbal interactions can be made. This method is also useful to record and analyze the verbal interactions between teacher and child or between children.
- Video recording - It is one of the most accurate ways to observe and record interaction in the group or classroom. Though expensive it is a visual and auditory record of what really happened.
- Anecdotal records- An anecdote is a brief account of an important developmental event. Writing an anecdote about children at play or work can be illustrative of their levels of development in many domains. It is useful as it records the behavior in context of a situation but may not give the complete picture of the behavior.
- Rating scales/ checklists – A checklist is a quick and easy way of recording information. A

checklist or a rating scale is a list of skills/ abilities or behaviours that are considered important for observation. When a child shows a particular behaviour it is ticked on the checklist. Raw observational data can be transferred onto checklists. They also lend themselves to comparison of behaviors of several children.

- Portfolios - is as an effective way to collect data on each child. It includes selected samples such as drawings, photos, tape recordings, writing samples, recorded observations by teachers, checklists, rating scales etc. Portfolio gives a comprehensive picture of the child's abilities in many different areas of curriculum.

### **Observation and child's privacy**

Children's right to privacy has to be upheld at all times. In reporting to a parent only their child needs to be discussed. Identity of children and groups of children should similarly be protected in discussions with administrators and school personnel. Names should be omitted from written reports as far as possible.

### **References**

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Rekha is chair Professor at the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Research (CECDR), Jamia Millia Islamia, on deputation from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. She has published in the areas of early childhood care and education, teacher education, creativity, qualitative research methods, disability and gender. She can be contacted at [rekha\\_s\\_sen@hotmail.com](mailto:rekha_s_sen@hotmail.com)

Shruti is Director, Learning Imprints Pvt. Ltd. at Vadodara. She has expertise in the area of special children who require care and need based programs for developmental, mental, emotional and physical problems and their inclusion in regular Early Childhood Care and Education programs. She has been actively engaged in this work for the past 18 years. Her area of work includes Infant Assessment, Assessment of young children and parent counselling, language, curriculum and teacher training with focus on identifying children with problems. She can be contacted at [shrutib20@gmail.com](mailto:shrutib20@gmail.com)