Authentic Assessment – What’s It All About?

Accountability is a big deal these days in education. NAEYC and other early childhood education partners have committed to closing learning gaps and increasing the achievement of all children. (NAEYC 2009) And in 2010, the K-12 community adopted the Common Core Standards to guide learning expectations during the school-age and teen years. “This will allow our teachers to be better equipped to know exactly what they need to help students learn and establish individualized benchmarks for them.” (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010) In order to document that these goals are being met, that learning is increasing, there must be an effective way to measure or evaluate results. This has created active discussion about effective assessment and a comparison of traditional assessment methods and “authentic assessment” practices.

While government agencies and funding organizations look for efficient, uniform ways to document skills and knowledge, educators, especially those in the early intervention and English Language Learner areas, stress the importance of assessing children’s abilities within the natural context of learning by people familiar to them. Terms like “in situ” (in place) and “every day settings” help to describe a key quality of authentic assessment. Dr. Stephen Bagnato (2007) describes the difference in evaluation practices this way: “Assessment of infants and preschoolers remains dominated by … inauthentic, contrived developmental tasks … in separate sessions, using small, unmotivating toys from boxes or test kits, staged at a table or on the floor in an unnatural setting … observing children perform in their natural settings offers authentic information that is much more descriptive of the child. Rating scales, direct observation, curriculum-based checklists, and caregiver interview inventories are useful in helping professionals obtain a realistic appraisal of the child’s strengths and intervention priorities.”

It is developmentally appropriate to not only look at a child’s independent work but also at what they can do with assistance from other children or adults. It is appropriate to measure and document what happens in group settings and in situations where a child is supported by others. (NAEYC 2009)

Lilian Katz (2012) advocates for a process that assesses the child’s experience rather than the specific outcomes at the preschool level. She suggests evaluating whether a preschool child is:

• Being intellectually engaged and absorbed.
• Being involved in sustained investigations of aspects of their environment and in experiences worthy of their interest, knowledge, and understanding.
• Helping others to discover things and to understand them better.
• Applying their developing literacy and numeracy skills in purposeful ways.
• Feeling that they belong to a group of their peers.

Traditional assessment methods emphasize uniform, rote testing (A.) while authentic assessment emphasizes collection of data during ordinary learning experiences in natural settings (B.).
These examples are a few among many that Katz believes are foundational for developmental success. But they shift the assessment from a child's products to a critique of the experience itself.

Authentic assessments also require that data be collected from multiple sources, including family members. As children mature to school-age settings, they can be actively involved in self-evaluations and in selecting work that they are most proud of to save in a portfolio to showcase their accomplishments.

Jon Mueller outlines the continuum of assessment between traditional approaches and authentic assessment strategies.

Traditional ...................... Authentic
Selecting a Response .......... Performing a Task
Contrived ....................... Real-life
Recall/Recognition .......... Construction/Application
Teacher-structured .......... Student-structured
Indirect Evidence ............ Direct Evidence

As with many early childhood education decisions, the choice to use authentic assessments or traditional assessments does not need to be an either/or decision but can be a both/and decision. It is appropriate to use some basic traditional assessments that are complemented by a range of authentic assessment results.

Why do this? The main reason that early childhood staff should engage in authentic assessment practices is to collect accurate data on children and their program so that they can use the information gained to design the next phase of the curriculum to meet the needs of the children based on the stated goals of the program. NAEYC (2009) stipulates that “Learning and development are most likely to occur when new experiences build on what a child already knows and is able to do… After the child reaches that new level of mastery in skill or understanding, the teacher reflects on what goals should come next; and the cycle continues, advancing children’s learning in a developmentally appropriate way.”

For additional information on assessment in early childhood, check out these resources:

- Better Kid Care’s tip page, Assessment, The Big Picture: What Is It? Why Do It?
- PA BUILD’s Early Childhood Assessment For Children From Birth To Age 8 (Grade 3)

References:


Mueller, Jon. Authentic Assessment Toolbox.

NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement, 2009

“We all have different strengths and weaknesses in how we learn. Similarly, we are different in how we can best demonstrate what we have learned.” – Jon Mueller