



"Look What I Did!" Why Portfolio-Based Assessment Works

By Priscilla D. Huffman, Ph.D.

The Child Development Associates (CDA) competencies that can be used for this article are:

To ensure a well-run, purposeful program responsive to participant needs.

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The ability to reliably assess children's development.

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Jack, age four, really liked to build three-dimensional structures. His block buildings were fantastic! Paula, also four, painted at the easel almost every day. Matthew worked well with puzzles. Ms. Sandy, the children's teacher, looked around her room and at all of the children playing busily. She needed a better way to document the development of the children within her program. "The children's progress often improves on a daily basis," thought Sandy, "so I need a system that is easy to use and flexible enough to take into account all of the activities that they participate in." Sandy also wondered whether there was a way to increase the participation of parents in their child's education.

Sandy had heard the terms "authentic assessment" and "developmental assessment" and had also read that the U.S. Secretary of Education had called for all educational programs to increase parent participation in the education of their children (Riley, p. 6). What Sandy needed was a way to involve parents and to keep better records of what children did while at school. What Sandy needed was portfolio-based assessment. Why Is Assessment Important?

Assessment is the process of finding out what children can do, what they know, and what they are interested in. Assessment is important because once a teacher or child care provider had gained information, appropriate activities and experiences can be provided to help the children continue to grow in all areas of development. Both *authentic assessment* and *developmental assessment* refer to the type of assessment, which is based on children's actual performance within their regular, real-life experiences, rather than on contrived testing measurement devices.

While there are many forms of assessment, certain methods work better with young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides assessment guidelines in its publication *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age Eight*. In this publication, NAEYC states that:

"Developmental assessment of children's progress and achievements is used to adapt curriculum to match the developmental needs of children, to communicate with the child's family, and to evaluate the program's effectiveness" (Bredenkamp, p. 13).

"Assessment of individual children's development and learning is essential for planning and implementing developmentally appropriate programs, but should be used with caution to prevent discrimination against individuals and to ensure accuracy. Accurate testing can only be achieved with reliable, valid instruments and such instruments developed for use with young children are extremely rare. In the absence of valid instruments, testing is not valuable. Therefore, assessment of young children should rely heavily on the results of observations and descriptive data" (Bredenkamp, pp. 12-13).

Using more than one source of information when assessing a child's progress provides a more comprehensive picture of how well he or she is functioning in all developmental areas. When assessment occurs regularly and over time, there can be more depth and breadth to the information obtained, which provides a more complete

picture of a child's progress.

What Are Portfolios?

Portfolios are collections or samplings of information relating to each child's developmental progress in an educational setting. As explained by Carol Gestwicki in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Curriculum and Development in Early Education*, "Portfolios may contain collections of representative work of children that illustrate their progress and achievements..." and "Children are encouraged to add their own selections of work that they feel show their progress to the portfolios" (Gestwicki, p. 304).

Another definition of a portfolio which promotes a positive, enthusiastic perspective is the statement in Janine Batzles's book, *Portfolio Assessment and Evaluation*: "A portfolio should be a celebration of the child's unique abilities, achievements, and progress, displayed through authentic samples" (Batzle, p. 60). This definition eliminates a sense of competition between children. Because portfolio development is an ongoing, never-ending process, the sharing of each child's progress can occur whenever desired by staff or parents.

Portfolios can take various physical forms, depending on the preferences of the child care professional and the type of child care program offered. Boxes, accordion files, folders, three-ring binders, photo albums, and various combinations of these or similar items can be used as receptacles for proofs of progress.

Sometimes, teachers prefer to have two containers: one for three-dimensional samples of the child's efforts and another for forms and two-dimensional sources of information. Each child should have his or her own portfolio collection so that the progress review is individualized. What Can Be Included in Portfolios?

There is no right or wrong in terms of setting up and contributing items to a portfolio. Each teacher's system can be unique and made to fit his or her particular program and curriculum. Each child's unique interests and needs can also be addressed in terms of what is included in his or her portfolio. One application of how several different samples can be collected is found in the chapter "September Visit: Keeping a Record of Our Lives Together" within the Jones and Nimmo book *Emergent Curriculum* (Jones & Nimmo, pp. 29-30). Examples of photos, drawings, conversational notes, and observations are included in the forms of documentation used. The following are some suggestions for types of entries that a teacher might include in a preschool child's portfolio.

Photographs

In many early childhood programs, younger children spend time working on tasks which are not easily saved for future reference. For example, building with blocks can be an involved activity which a child might pursue with vigor. Various progress in the child's abilities to work with blocks can be documented over time by taking photographs of the various structures built. A permanent record is then available for future reference and can serve as a topic of discussion with the parents and the child. A list of possible photos a teacher might take include the following:

- Completed block structures
- Larger paintings
- Samples of bead stringing, including stringing according to pictured patterns
- Puzzles completed without assistance, noting the number of pieces or the complexity of the puzzle design
- Small manipulative three-dimensional projects completed
- Any activity especially enjoyed by the child
- A photo of the child at the beginning and end of the year.

In the course of a month, it is likely that the teacher will want to take photographs of a child's efforts. A helpful hint is to number a note card or sheet of paper to correspond to the number of pictures. Then, when a photo is taken, the teacher can note the child, date, and contents of the photo.

Actual Work Samples

Examples of children's work which can be saved to demonstrate each child's progress include these:

- Two-dimensional art projects, including samples of drawing, cutting, and/or pasting. Some teachers include samples of the same project taken at two or three different times during the year.
- Samples which each child selects on his or her own. Each child will have projects that he or she feels especially good about. These are prime candidates for inclusion in a portfolio for sharing with parents later on.

- Emergent writing samples. Depending on the age and developmental level of each child, attempts to write might include beginning scribbling, naming, or labeling of work, or other inventive spelling examples. Examples should illustrate each child's progress over time.
- A record of each child's quest for knowledge. Some teachers keep a record of what each child wants to find out about at the beginning of each thematic unit. Teachers soon discover that finding out what interests each child can be used in planning future curriculum and thematic units.

Audio and Video

Obtaining a record of each child "in action" is a very enjoyable and concrete way to show each child's development over time. The teacher can record various samples of each child's work and progress, and specific portions can be viewed or listened to during conferences. Video can be used to show a child in the "process of creating" or in virtually any activity. Audiotapes can be used to record sample conversations, such as Show and Tell sharing; conversations at snack or meal times; and reciting poems, action rhymes, or songs.

In addition to the sharing with parents that is carried out at various points during the year, the completed audio and video can be given to parents at the end of the year. This is usually well-received by both parents and grandparents alike! Forms Used by Teachers and Parents

There are many types of forms which can be used effectively for seeking information about each child and his or her developmental needs. Many forms are completed through teacher observations. Teachers observe children interacting with their environment and with others and document what they see. Some teachers use checklists or other forms to record their observations. This process seems to be natural and appropriate for preschool teachers because "Preschool children demonstrate growth and learning through activity (Wortham, 1994, p. 213).

There are a number of additional reasons why teachers should make observations. Some relate to assessing and evaluating children's progress in developmental areas. Many of the reasons for observing children and the various types of teacher observations which can be used are presented in Sue Martin's book *TAKE A LOOK – Observation and Portfolio Assessment in Early Childhood*.

Some of the types of observations teachers frequently choose to make include the following:

- Informal anecdotal or narrative records
- Checklists that focus on each child's development in several specific areas. An extensive listing of the various uses for developmental checklists and sample checklists can be found in Sue Clark Wortham's book *Organizing Instruction in Early Childhood – A Handbook of Assessment and Activities*, p. 11.
- Time sampling. Teachers can note what activity a child is pursuing at different times during the day. For example, teachers can list the possible choices each preschooler might make during free play or self-select time. Then, at set times during free play, the teacher observes how each child is involved and places a check mark corresponding to the area in which the child is playing. Using a different colored ink pen for each of the observation times helps a teacher to look back later to see patterns of play as well as the frequency with which each child uses specific areas of the room.
- Sticky notes. Some teachers prefer to keep a pad of sticky notes and a pen in a pocket and jot down observations on children as they occur. A clipboard can hold squared-off sheet of paper with each child's name at the top of a square. When a dated observation has been written on the sticky note, it can be transferred to the clipboard page. This is an easy way for a teacher to check that she is observing all of the children. A quick look at the clipboard tells who needs to receive some observation time. When the clipboard has been filled, the sticky notes can be transferred onto a page in each child's portfolio.

While teachers are free to use whatever forms make sense to them when setting up and using portfolios, developing forms and checklists should be based on sound understanding of child development principles (Essa & Rogers, p. 89). Various combinations can occur depending on the type of information being sought, shared, and utilized. Often, information gained through these various methods can be useful for instructional planning, as well as student progress sharing. These methods fit well with the NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Guidelines, which state, "Appropriate curriculum planning is based on teachers' observations and recordings of each child's special interests and developmental progress" (Bredenkamp, p.3)

Seeking Parent Involvement

Frequently, parental input is sought because valuable information relating to the child can be obtained from parents as well as used effectively in the instructional planning process. Forms can be developed which seek

information, such as a child's:

- Likes and dislikes
- Favorite foods
- Special needs
- Health
- Favorite television programs
- Favorite books
- Favorite toys
- Fears
- Family activities

When parents contribute information at portfolio conferences, the conferences become a productive sharing and planning time in addition to the needed reporting of progress.

In a concrete way, children in attendance at portfolio conferences see the importance adults place on working together with them to help them grow and develop. This process helps children appreciate their own special characteristics and abilities. Because they are such a vital component in the portfolio process, this type of assessment "supports, rather than threatens, children's feelings of self-esteem (Gestwicki, p. 302).

Conclusion

Portfolios are useful, effective tools to aid early childhood professionals in acknowledging and documenting each child's progress. Portfolios can be unique to each child and the contents can focus on each child's specific interactions with his or her environment, materials, peers, and teachers. Both parents and children can work together positively. This three-way conferencing and planning method, involving teachers, parents, and children, is a major goal of authentic assessment today (Ryan, p. 2). Portfolios are practical and useful as both reporting and planning tools. The form and format are adaptable to each educational program for young children. Those who have tried them, like them!

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