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Authentic Assessment: A Strengths-Based Approach to Making Thinking, Learning, and Development Visible

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Close your eyes and imagine a child walking on a playground. There are flowers in large pots in the center; around the flowerpots are gravel pathways with trees lining the edges. Beyond the trees are other children playing, talking, running, and laughing. Open your eyes and think about what you saw in your mind. Did you notice the child's facial expressions? Were they tentative about joining in with the other children, or were they excited and ready to explore on their own?

Did you notice their walking gait or other motor movements? Did you notice the different physical elements in the playground environment and how the child interacted with them? Did you notice how the child engaged with other children in their play? Did you see the outdoor environment and how it supports various areas of development and curriculum?

Learning to really see each individual child—their abilities, their strengths, and their possibilities—is an art. Documenting this and making thinking, learning, and development visible help early childhood educators understand the child better and help others value the child's capabilities. Documentation takes practice, collaboration, and support. It also takes an internal motivation to truly understand children.

In this article, I discuss how learning to use authentic assessment strategies (such as documentation of a child's skills and interests) starts with learning to see and observe children in their environments and continues with a teacher's evaluation and reflection. I also discuss the role of technology in documentation and in creating and using ePortfolios. (See "Making Thinking, Learning, and Development Visible Through ePortfolios" below.) Finally, I address how working to understand a child's community, traditions, family, and background strengthens assessment and helps to tell the child's whole story in an inclusive way.

What Is Authentic Assessment?

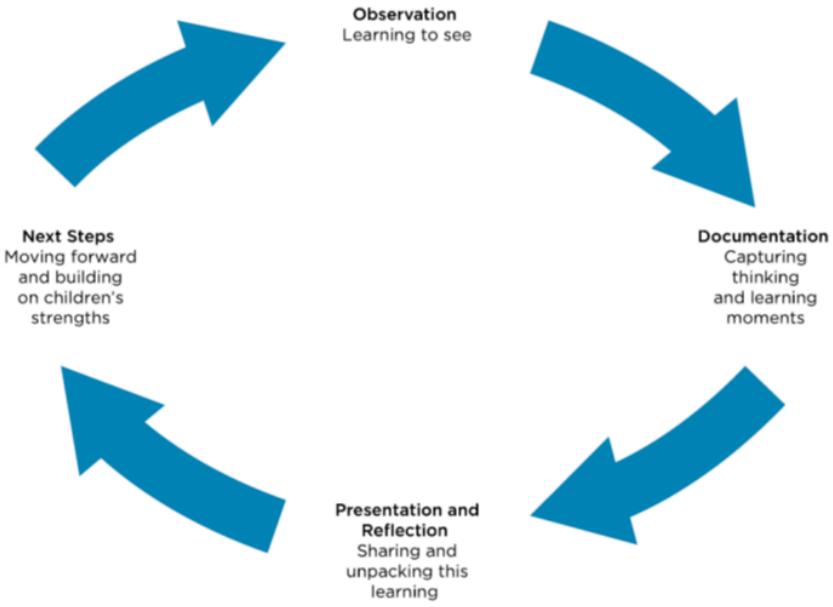
Authentic assessment is the process of learning about a child's capabilities, including where they are and where they are going. These capabilities include the skills, attributes, characteristics, and dispositions that help teachers understand children in their educational settings. Authentic assessment is thoughtful and intentional, requiring adequate time and resources for support. The process of authentic assessment helps to tell the "whole story" of a child, including their developmental and cultural story, their thinking story, and their group story, or how a child interacts within a group.

Authentic Assessment Strategies Are Strengths-Based

The process of authentic assessment helps to shift the concept of assessment from a narrow view of comparing children with numbers that reflect what they *do not* know to a system that demonstrates what children *do* know and can do (Escamilla 2021). One way to document visual and auditory evidence of a child's growth and learning abilities is to create a portfolio, hard copy or digital, that includes photos, transcripts, and videos (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015; Seitz 2018). To do this, teachers need an ongoing system to collect documentation (observations, photos, and work samples) on each child. For example, to document a child's ability to write, an educator can begin by collecting a writing sample with a photo of how the child holds the writing implement as well as notes about the experience. This provides assessment data for a particular date. If

this process is repeated every month or two and then put together, these pieces will tell a story, and the documentation (authentic assessment) will show how the child is growing and developing.

Authentic Assessment Cycle



Authentic Assessment Strategies Are Culturally Responsive

Hammond (2014) defines *culturally responsive teaching* as "an educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content" (15). Culturally responsive means that early educators learn about, build upon, and provide opportunities to understand children and their families. Being culturally responsive includes learning about family values and cultural traditions so that the environment is a safe and inviting place that reflects the learning community. The learning community consists of many parts that make a whole. Each group of children looks and acts differently depending on their prior knowledge and their families' experiences and expectations. When the teacher looks at these elements holistically and builds opportunities based on a group's assets, the community of learners comes together and is culturally relevant to the children and their families.

Authentic Assessment Strategies Promote Equity in a Digital World

Technology is all around us. We use smart phones, tablets, video games, computers, and smart speakers that talk to us. However, not all children, families, early childhood educators, and early learning programs have equitable opportunities to learn about and use technology. The issue of access became even more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some programs, educators, and families had ample technology resources to connect and engage in learning experiences, while others did not and struggled to do so, resulting in inequitable experiences and longer term consequences (Roth 2021). Being aware of and addressing such inequities along with the purpose and intentionality of technology can help create greater equity in a digital world (Fantozzi 2021, 83).

How can technology, such as apps, social media platforms, and websites, support authentic assessment when the digital landscape is not equitable for everyone? Teachers need to teach *how* to find, process, and use the information learned through these sources in a responsible and equitable way (Rogow 2022). Relevant and important skills for young children to learn in digitally driven learning experiences are similar to skills educators should look for in nondigital learning experiences. These include collaboration, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and communication, which can prepare young children for current and future learning. Teachers can document this learning through multiple avenues as part of the authentic assessment process.

It is important to think about the audience for documentation.

How Do We Make Thinking, Learning, and Development Visible?

There are four steps in the authentic assessment cycle, which are illustrated in the "Authentic Assessment Cycle" graphic below. The complete cycle makes learning visible in an appealing way that is culturally and linguistically appropriate and addresses how children learn in a digital world. When an educator applies these four steps, it helps various audiences in addition to the educator—including children, families, and the community—understand and value children's thinking, learning, and development.

Making Learning Visible

Making learning visible involves using documentation to tell the story of the whole child and all their capabilities. The approach took root in the late 1990s and 2000s from both Harvard's School of Education's initiative, Project Zero, and from John Hattie's work in New Zealand (Hattie 2009; Harvard School of Education: Project Zero). Reggio Emilia educators also apply the model of making learning visible when using documentation and reflection to highlight learning and connections (Giudici & De Poi 2020).

Making learning visible has gained ground over the years because it is a way to deepen the understanding of children's development by using documentation as evidence. These artifacts are a form of authentic assessment and may include photographs, video clips, observation records, reflections, and work samples, all of which help to deepen the understanding of an event and to extend children's learning.

This approach helps to gather information to understand and assess individual children's learning and can also be used to reflect on group events and to tell a group's story. Group stories allow teachers to reflect on the curriculum so that they can strengthen and change learning experiences to address individual and group interests, strengths, areas of growth, and social and cultural contexts. In addition, documentation showcases everyday experiences in early childhood settings and provides meaning and value to a wide range of activities.

Step 1: What Can Educators Observe?

The first step in the cycle is *observation*. Observation, which serves several purposes, includes looking for thinking, learning, development, and engagement. Based on observations, teachers can plan learning experiences; respond to children's interests, strengths, and needs; decide how to guide interactions and play; and offer evidence of children's learning and development. Educators must practice watching children in and outside of educational settings. They can take photographs and videos of children engaged in activities and write down quotations of individual children, noticing and capturing small things about each child. Some of the smallest things are important, such as how often the child shares materials with a peer or where and how the child stands or sits in relation to other children or adults. It is important to note that these observations should be factual and not based on interpretations. All of us come with various preconceived ideas and different cultural lenses, so we need to observe carefully, with thoughtfulness and reflection.

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Step 2: How Does Documentation Tell a Story of Learning?

After careful observation, the early childhood educator begins the second step in the cycle—*documentation*. Documentation involves looking at observational notes, records, photographs, and other collected materials. (See "What Documentation and Artifacts Should I Collect?" below.) Educators can put these materials together to tell the child's learning story. Documentation can take many forms, from a notebook to an ePortfolio to a website or another platform (such as a private share site accessible only to the children's families), and it can include photos, short videos, or comments about a child's learning community.

It is important to think about the audience for the documentation. If the audience is the family, teachers should provide documentation in an accessible format for the family to see their child's story. Different devices manage documentation in various ways. Administrators and community members may want to learn about different aspects of a story. For example, they may want to know how a classroom community as a whole is successful, engaged, learning, growing, and meeting developmental milestones rather than a specific child. Often, a website can make learning visible in a classroom without identifying individual children. In all cases, the educator must communicate their ideas to families beforehand and seek permission, particularly for posting photos, videos, and other personalized information.

What Documentation and Artifacts Should I Collect and Share?

Documentation and artifacts help to tell the story of a child's learning. Multiple forms of documentation and artifacts can be used to make children's thinking, learning, and development visible and to provide a fuller picture of a child's growth. In addition, they can be aligned with ongoing planning and teaching and with developmental guidelines or standards for an early learning setting.

Work Samples

Work samples are a great way to show how a child's learning and development change over time. For example, collecting writing samples at the beginning of the year and each month will show the child's progression in this area. Children's reflections on their growth through work samples can also provide a deeper understanding of their abilities. Other forms of work samples include pieces from inquiry-based projects (documentation of the process and products of the project), observational science drawings, notes from math journals, and more (Helm & Beneke 2007).

Photographs and Video Documentation

Photographs and videos can be powerful documentation tools. Children interact with materials, each other, and their teachers in ways that are sometimes hard to write about or to record on a checklist or rating sheet. Many children are familiar with being photographed and recorded, and families like these tools too. Building on technologies already familiar to children and families and sharing these forms of documentation are easy ways to make learning visible (Seitz 2008; Seitz & Bartholomew 2008).

Seeing interactions of children engaged in their learning through short video clips and photographs—like a clip of a child building a block tower or a photograph of a child holding a pencil and a second photo showing the writing sample—helps to tell a more comprehensive story. In addition, when educators add information about why the events in video clips and photographs are important, the evidence can be compelling to share through an ePortfolio.

Observational Records

An observational record is an authentic notation about an occurrence in an early childhood setting. Observational records can capture moments like a child learning to write their name or learning how to balance on one foot. Teachers can write observations on sticky notes, in a handy notebook, or on a more formalized sheet. More recently, some teachers and programs have started to use an app to record observational notes. Written and typed notes can be uploaded to an ePortfolio collection.

Resources

Resources can be added to portfolios to make them a richer, more supportive experience. Embedded resources, like state standards, school district guidelines, and program guidelines, may be hyperlinked to support documentation throughout the portfolio. Resources may also entail enhancements or extension ideas for families connected to projects or learning experiences, like book suggestions for related children's books and ideas for family adventures such as taking a walk down a neighborhood street to find five different color houses or buildings.

A final section in the portfolio may include local community resources and events. This is an easy way to help families connect to services and supports, such as local recreation and cultural centers, physical and mental health agencies, nutrition services or programs, and more.

Step 3: How Can Educators Showcase the Value of Learning Experiences with Families and Communities?

The third step in the cycle is *presentation and reflection*. This is important for educators, children, families, and the community because sharing and unpacking the documentation of learning help to underscore the value and purpose of the learning experiences. Presentation and reflection can be done in several formats; each has value in a different way. A presentation may be as simple as welcoming a family into the classroom at the end of the day and inviting the child to share a sample from their ePortfolio or a piece of their work displayed on a bulletin board. Having a child become the center of the experience tells them that their work, abilities, and ideas are important and special.

Teachers may facilitate a more formal gathering or family celebration to share documentation of a group's collective work. Formal sharing can be done in the evening, during class lunch, or even during the weekend, depending on a family or community member's access and schedules. The actual event can be presented by educators and children through a video or a series of documentation panels. A documentation panel showcases photographs, written transcripts, and work samples as a story on a bulletin board or on smaller poster panels.

These sharings celebrate the children's strengths, imaginations, and abilities. Formal presentation gatherings are also outlets for families to build a sense of community based on their children's learning and cultural connections. After the presentation, it is important to reflect on the experience. This leads to the last step of the process.

Step 4: How Does Authentic Assessment Inform Future Learning?

The *next steps* portion, the fourth and final step in the authentic assessment cycle, helps educators determine where a child is developmentally and emotionally and consider what to do next. For example, do some children need more time with building blocks? Are others ready to take the next step toward writing sight words? Teachers and families can answer these questions together as they look at children's authentic assessments and build a curriculum in response. In this way, the curriculum will be more meaningful and more connected to children and their families, their communities, and cultural values.

Conclusion

The authentic assessment process is a valuable tool in today's diverse early childhood classroom. Learning to observe, document, and present and reflect guides teachers to the final progression, next steps, which is needed to help children grow and thrive. Authentic assessment helps build community in the classroom and is a way to really know and understand each child's cultural and learning story.

This article includes content from Hilary Seitz's chapter in *Advancing Equity and Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Education: Elevating Voices and Actions* as well as content from an original manuscript by the author accepted for *Young Children*.

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