What does authentic assessment look like in a play-based program?

Impact on Educator Learning

Letting go of control

- We were better able to assess because centres were open-ended and we did not have to police the children at the centres.
- You can’t have everything planned. We have plans but we also see what emerges.
- Before we focussed on “where do we need to get to”, now we focus on what the children are telling us they need to learn.
- Children can show their learning in many different ways. We needed to open up our understanding of what was evidence of learning. For example, during the inquiry unit at the end of the year we realized how much we could learn about a student’s understanding through their art work.

We had to look at learning goals and success criteria differently

- We started thinking of “success criteria” as labelling the learning, rather than presenting it as a list of what students needed to be able to do.
- The learning goals and success criteria had to be broad in order to include everyone on the developmental continuum.
- Co-creating success criteria allows for more ownership and understanding of the learning goal.
  - There were multiple entry points. Children were taken where they are and successes were celebrated along the way.
  - ECE’s tended to start where the children are and teachers started with the curriculum. Having common success criteria and learning goals bridged the gap between the ECE and the teacher and allowed the teacher and the ECE to be on the same page. It is critical that the teacher and the ECE create the learning goal and success criteria together.
- We found that some things lent themselves better to looking at development on a continuum than with success criteria.
Knowing and understanding the expectations

- Having learning goals and knowing what evidence to look for allowed us to take better observational notes and we also knew the children better.
- Through creating the learning goals and success criteria we were able to get a better understanding of the expectations in the Program Document. Having these expectations in our heads allowed us to be more emergent in our planning because we were able to see where an expectation was emerging in the children’s work and play.
  - Knowing the expectations helped us be more flexible and respond to children’s needs.

Ongoing assessment

- It takes time for on-going assessment to become a habit.
- Different educators found different assessment tools to be more helpful than others. For example, some educators liked to video while others preferred to take pictures and anecdotal notes.
- Because we assessed on a daily basis and in more authentic contexts, we gathered a lot of information and felt we knew our students much better. As a result fall interviews and report card writing were much easier.

The importance of observation in assessment

- Watching the children allows you to know where you are going next.
- How we collect data on children matters. The emphasis on having children write ideas and knowledge that kids can give orally may have held some children back.
- Having two educators in the room makes this type of assessment much easier. As one educator said, “When Laurie is doing the circle I have a clipboard in my hand. When you are up there (teaching) you can’t see everything.”

Teaching and assessing through authentic/real-life contexts

- Authentic/real life contexts gave us better assessment data.
- Student engagement in topics has encouraged children to want to read and write and do math in authentic contexts.
• We got more authentic information on children’s learning because we were collecting the information as the children were at play. As one educator stated, “A reflection from last year got us started on the need for more authentic assessment: I had pulled a child aside during math centres and asked him to count for me as far as he could. He stopped at 29. Minutes later, Laurie asked him how many cubes were in the tower he built and he readily counted his cubes to 52.”

• It is difficult to leave lesson plans for occasional professionals because someone else cannot do the inquiry for you.

Making the learning visible (pedagogical documentation)
• Everybody moved forward because we shared their learning.
• Using the documentation and the panels (pedagogical documentation) made the learning visible for the children.
• Referring to the panel all the time is critical.
• When we introduce something new to one child and make this learning visible to the other children it “takes off”.
• Educators also used the panels to reflect and plan.
• Panels do not take a lot of educator time if you construct them with the children.
• You can’t document everything. Be strategic (keep expectations in mind).
• During the inquiry process, documentation was happening throughout the room.

Integrated curriculum, inquiry learning
• This is related to the importance of authentic and real life contexts. Real life contexts do not neatly separate the content areas but integrate them in meaningful ways. Inquiry is a way of doing this.
• It is important to assess skills in different contexts across the curriculum.
• If we are trying to develop skills and assess skills, the content does not matter.

Focus on the students and the learning (ownership, engagement)
• Engagement is key to authentic assessment and authentic assessment is key to getting accurate information on young children’s development.
• Focus on the learning, not the tool.
• Having the children’s voices on the panels is really important. The children’s voices are telling the learning.
Collaborative Inquiry Project 2011–2012

• Co-creating the panels allowed children to participate and engage in their learning. One educator stated: “I see the children being the guide. You documented where they need to go or want to go next.”
• The teaching became less teacher directed and more child focussed.
• We are able to find the strengths of students that we did not know about before.
• We are better able to engage children and therefore getting deeper thinking. Children are showing more ownership.

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• Having conversations with the children was very important. They helped us get a better understanding of the learning. Sometimes we make assumptions about a child’s learning and conversations help to clarify.
  - When children are engaged they will ask to read and write. For example, children engaged in the inquiry based wildlife investigations chose to continue to research and look for answers in non-fiction books during open centres and activity time. We were able to continue to document their learning at these times.

• Leave materials out even after a unit or inquiry is complete. Children will continue to go back to these materials and may show evidence of learning long after the inquiry is finished.

Purpose matters

• Everything we do in the classroom comes back to “Who is this for?” “What is the purpose?”
• Having a focus or purpose helped us decide what photos needed to be taken. Photos and video had to relate to both the learning goal and any other spontaneous learning.
• Planning became collecting materials and books for the children to use, but this was very purposeful.
• We were very concerned that the purpose of the documentation panels be primarily for the children.

In the observation, the documentation, the assessment and the instruction are happening at the same time. They are not discreet processes.

Including parents in the process is important

• Creating digital portfolios better enabled us to talk to parents about their child’s development. We felt this was actually better than the report card.
• Interviews and observations are much more powerful communicators of learning than report cards and much more meaningful to parents.
• Our portfolios this year were more focused, as one educator said: “Last year’s portfolios were a story. This year’s portfolios are a story of learning.”
• Digital portfolios made a huge difference in educating parents on the play-based program.
- Sending documentation binders home at the end of a unit of study took too long. A newspaper allowed information to get to parents in a timely manner. However, we still feel that the binders have their place as well, as a record of learning in the classroom.

**Successful assessment is a combination of practices**

- Good assessment in kindergarten is a combination of all of the pedagogy mentioned above. Assessment is integrated into every aspect of teaching and learning.
- The observation, the documentation, the assessment and the instruction are happening at the same time. They are not discreet processes.
- This helped support the inquiry learning because we were able to be more emergent.
- This enabled us to set up our centres based on our learning goals. This gave children an opportunity to demonstrate their learning.
- Children were able to demonstrate their learning in different ways at different centres and doing different activities.
- This enabled the educators to give children more choice because there were many ways to show the learning.