

3.3 “But What Is My Child Learning?”

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Connections to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

- Chapter 5: The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting (Learning Through Play: A Play Spectrum—pages 86–92)
- Chapter 7: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections
- Chapter 8: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning

Case Overview

In this case, the new teacher of a class of 3-year-olds has a conference with Mei’s family. The teacher shares her observations of Mei’s development and learning, which are based on an informal but systematic assessment method. She later realizes that she has neglected to first establish a reciprocal partnership with Mei’s family by not including them in the assessment process. Through reflection with her mentor teacher, she rethinks how to explain to all families the role of assessment and to share assessment information in ways that respect the families’ goals and expectations for their children’s education. The teacher also considers how she might make the links between classroom learning experiences and skill development more obvious to families. The follow-up meeting between teacher and family provides an opportunity to plan ways they might collaborate and communicate regularly about Mei’s learning, both at home and at school.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify the roles children’s families can play in the assessment process and the benefits of their involvement.
2. Describe the role of teacher reflection at various points in the informal assessment process and the forms it can take.
3. Describe in what ways a playful learning program design can present both challenges and opportunities for the informal assessment process.

Case Narrative

Mei Lin begins preschool the day after her September birthday. She holds up three fingers to show Ms. Gonzalez, her new teacher, how old she is. During their December family conference, Ms. Gonzalez tells Mei’s mother and grandmother all about the class’s fall projects and the cooperative play skills Mei is using as she and her classmates explore together. She shares her anecdotal observation documentation notes and assures Mei’s family that her assessment of Mei’s progress shows growth in all developmental domains. When Ms. Gonzalez asks if they have any questions, Mei’s mother shakes her head and thanks the teacher.

A week later, Mei's father calls her to request another meeting. Ms. Gonzalez, a bilingual (Spanish/English) second-year teacher, wonders why and begins to think the family conference may not have gone as smoothly as she'd thought. She decides to discuss this during her upcoming meeting with Mrs. Lopez, her mentor teacher.

At their meeting, Ms. Gonzalez describes briefly to Mrs. Lopez how she conducted the family conference and her resulting concerns. Her mentor begins their reflection session with a few questions.

Mrs. Lopez: We discussed family learning goals at a staff meeting earlier this year. Did the Lin family share with you any of their own learning goals for Mei?

Ms. Gonzalez: No, I guess we really haven't talked about it. I've mostly been trying to meet the goals I know are in the state guidelines.

Mrs. Lopez: I have a list of questions I usually ask my families at our first family visit. I am happy to share it with you. Also, I wonder whether they have a clear understanding of our program's approach to assessment. It can seem unusual to new preschool parents and may not provide the kind of information about traditional school subjects that families expect.

Ms. Gonzalez: That's a good point. I just assumed they knew what preschool was about, but I guess the ways we do everything would seem new if it's their child's first year in preschool.

Mrs. Lopez: Yes, that's often true, especially since our preschool's program is built around playful learning experiences. I wonder whether our newer families can really envision the ways it supports early learning. Do you think they may have expected a different-looking classroom experience?

Ms. Gonzalez: Yes, I need to remind myself that everyone has different expectations depending on what they grew up with.

Mrs. Lopez: And just one more thought. I wonder what languages Mei's family is most comfortable using. Could that have explained their silence during the conference?

Ms. Gonzalez: Hmm, well Mei's family is Chinese American, and I do know that Mei's grandmother, who lives in the household and drops off and picks her up from preschool, speaks only Cantonese. Her parents understand both languages, but now that I'm thinking about it, Mei's mother seems more self-conscious about speaking English than her father. (*Sighs.*) Thanks for helping me think through all this. I guess I need to do some more thinking between now and next week's conference with Mei's father. I'll check back in after it's over.

As part of her ongoing reflective practice, Ms. Gonzalez takes some time to journal about her experience with Mei's family and the questions Mrs. Lopez asked her to consider. It was true that she had not spent time explaining to families how she designs the learning environment so that all children have a variety of foundational experiences that enable them to develop the skills outlined in their states' early learning guidelines. And while she uses portfolios to keep a record of children's ongoing development and to inform her intentional curriculum planning, she hadn't thought to use them as a tool for communicating children's learning to families. She also acknowledges that she hasn't made much effort to include families in her informal assessment process or explicitly ask them about the experiences they hope their child has at school. To begin to establish a reciprocal relationship with Mei's family, and to learn more about their goals for her learning and development, she plans for her follow-up conversation with Mr. Lin. She reviews Mei's portfolio and chooses a photo and writing sample that highlights a rich learning experience from the fall.

Mr. Lin: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I have some questions about what Mei is learning at school. Her mother passed along the story you told about Mei and her friends playing together in the in the block area. And her grandmother shares that she looks happy when she picks her up, but she doesn't have much information about her day. While we are of course glad Mei is making friends and having fun, we would like to know more about how, without many formal teaching and worksheet activities, she is learning the skills that will help her get ready for kindergarten.

Ms. Gonzalez: I appreciate you following up with me and certainly understand your wanting to know more about what Mei is learning at school. Our program design focuses on playful learning experiences that support children’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. I brought her portfolio with me to show you some of examples of how we document and assess children’s learning and development and plan curriculum that builds on children’s strengths and supports their growth. (*Opens Mei’s portfolio, which includes anecdotal observation notes, photo documentation, writing samples, and artwork. Flips to a page that includes a photo of Mei playing in the dramatic play area with two other children.*)

Ms. Gonzalez: Here is Mei playing with her friends in our play kitchen. Mei was pretending to cook food and looked through the recipe book on the table. As she flipped through the pages, she pointed to some letters as she named them. She was particularly interested in the letter *M*. When she couldn’t find anything she wanted to cook, I suggested she make her favorite food and that together, we write her own recipe. Here is a sample of her writing. You can see the shape of an *O* and an *L* that she wrote to stand for the word *noodles*, referencing the list of ingredients I had written as she dictated what we needed. I also took this photo to highlight her ability to count with one-to-one correspondence as she set the table with three plates and three cups. You can also see that she gave everyone matching colors; she put the red cup with the red plate, the blue with the blue, and green with green. This is an important early math skill.

Ms. Gonzalez continues the conversation by sharing a few more examples of the learning Mei is doing at school. Mr. Lin thanks her for the detailed information and shares the skills he sees his daughter exhibiting at home. He also asks that Ms. Gonzalez share more specific examples with them throughout the year.

Takeaways and Next Steps

While Ms. Gonzalez feels the second conference was a success, she still has a lot to think about. Having the portfolio at the meeting allowed her to highlight specific skill development and illustrate for the family how she plans for children’s exploration and learning. She will continue to do that. In her next meeting with her mentor, she hopes to brainstorm ideas for involving families in the assessment process; after all, they have repeated opportunities to observe their child’s activities and interactions over time and in a variety of situations. Their perspectives, combined with her observations, will provide a completer and more reliable picture of each child’s knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

It is also clear to Ms. Gonzalez that she needs to find a way to pass on information to families about children’s school experiences despite any language barriers that might exist. She realizes that she did not ask Mr. Lin about the family’s goals for Mei’s learning and development and decides to make a point to ask all families in the future about this. As a new teacher, she knows she has a lot to learn and is thankful for the mentorship of Mrs. Lopez and for families that challenge her to articulate her methods. She knows this will make her a better educator of young children.

This case illustrates several of the many challenges a new teacher encounters beyond planning curriculum and mastering effective teaching strategies. Developing a clear sense of the benefits of assessment, both for children and families and for herself, will strengthen Ms. Gonzalez’s teaching practice. Building truly reciprocal partnerships with families around learning goals and their assessment will support children’s learning in both home and school contexts. Thinking more about how playful learning approaches benefit children will help her learn how to describe them to others and ensure that they remain central to her teaching and to her authentic assessment of children’s learning and development. Developing comfort and confidence with this process is crucial to Ms. Gonzalez’s ability to be an effective early childhood educator.

Case Discussion Questions

1. Describe how building an ongoing, reciprocal partnership with the Lin family can enhance the future assessment of Mei’s progress toward learning goals.

2. What approach did Mrs. Lopez use to assist Ms. Gonzalez (a beginning teacher), and how will it strengthen Ms. Gonzalez’s future professionalism? What additional supports could build Ms. Gonzalez’s future competence in the assessment process?
3. Considering what she learned through her experience with the Lin family, what steps can Ms. Gonzalez take to strengthen reciprocal partnerships with families of varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

General Discussion Questions

1. What routines, practices, and program supports are key to helping a teacher use formative assessment effectively to support each child’s learning?
2. How can a teacher meaningfully involve a young preschooler’s family in all three steps of the informal assessment process (gathering of information, documentation, and reflection; see Scott-Little, with Reschke 2022, 161)?
3. Cultural expectations affect what children are expected to learn and how they demonstrate their knowledge. How can a teacher address families’ differing beliefs about how early learning programs should facilitate the acquisition of foundational knowledge and skills?
4. What language and examples might a teacher use to explain to families and others the advantages of a play-based program over a more direct instructional style? How can program leaders prepare and support teachers to do this effectively?

References

Scott-Little, C. With K.L. Reschke. 2022. “Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning.” In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, 4th ed., NAEYC, 159–80. Washington, DC: NAEYC.