As early childhood educators, assessment is not a process that we’ve always been very comfortable with. Perhaps it’s because we have tended to see assessment as a process that’s too judgmental and limiting.

Maybe we like the idea of open-ended possibilities too much to want to narrow them down by assessing them. Or perhaps it’s just because we’ve never actually had to do much formal assessment before.

Whatever the reason, assessment is not something that early childhood educators have traditionally done. Instead, what we have tended to do well is see all manner of potential learning in the experiences we provide. This is not a bad thing (in fact it’s one of our strengths as early childhood educators), but it’s not assessment either, and if we aren’t careful, this focus on potential can get in the way when we do try to make accurate assessments of what children are really learning.

The importance of assessment, as the Early Years Learning Framework makes clear, is that it helps us to think about and plan what we do. It helps us to identify children’s strengths and weaknesses so that we can plan effective learning experiences for them; it helps us to communicate about children’s progress with others; and it helps us to evaluate how well our teaching is actually supporting children’s learning. All of this highlights the need to make sure our assessments are as accurate and meaningful as possible.

A problem arises, however, if we confuse potential with actual learning. For instance, when we talk about the learning involved in sand and water play, we typically find ourselves talking about the potential for all kinds of science and maths learning as children measure and pour, or observe what floats and what doesn’t. All of which is true—sand and water do offer great opportunities for learning about measurement and other science and maths concepts. But just because such learning is possible doesn’t automatically mean that it happens. There is a crucial difference between potential and actual learning. Assessment is about the actual learning rather than merely what’s possible. Part of the problem is that as early childhood educators, we tend to highly value incidental and indirect learning—the kind of learning that we imagine children absorb almost unconsciously from their surroundings. Because of this we can overlook the key role that we as educators need to engage in if such learning is to actually happen. Returning to the example of the sand and water, it is unlikely, unless we have consciously drawn a child’s attention to concepts such as buoyancy or measurement, that they will have simply been absorbed.

In any case, complex ideas such as measurement are not usually grasped or fully understood after a single experience of tipping and pouring. A concept such as measurement develops over time as children engage in many experiences that involve measuring different materials in different ways, and as they consciously engage with the ideas and concepts that make up our understandings of measurement. Simply participating in an experience that has the potential for learning about measurement does not equal learning about measurement. Nor does participation in a single experience guarantee a complete understanding. Yet if we act as though learning happens by osmosis then our tendency is to assume the exact opposite—that simply being exposed to materials and experiences rich in potential
learning somehow ensures that the learning will automatically happen. In the process we end up making mountains out of molehills—building such experiences up into far more than they really are and, because of this, misinterpreting or overlooking the actual learning that is going on. If we see learning as happening automatically then we tend not to put the effort into making sure that it happens. When we see learning as a process of accumulation then we are more likely to structure what we do to reflect this, and be more attentive to what is actually happening along the way.

A similar kind of thinking seems to be present in some of the debate about how to measure and assess children’s progress towards the Early Years Learning Framework’s Learning Outcomes, particularly in the belief that effective assessment is a simple process of identifying which outcome (or outcomes) relate to a particular experience.

Recognising how outcomes and experiences are linked is important. But if all we do is cross-reference our program to the Learning Outcomes, then we risk trivialising the outcomes and misunderstanding the learning that may be occurring. Given the emphasis that the Early Years Learning Framework places on holistic learning, and the interconnectedness of the outcomes themselves, it is likely that any single experience will potentially lead to some kind of learning in all five outcome areas. To simply write all five outcomes next to each experience however becomes meaningless, unless we go beyond this to actually explore what specific learning is occurring, and for whom.

The outcomes are about broad, long-term learning. An individual experience may well provide one step toward achieving a particular outcome. However, in the absence of anything else, it won’t bring the outcome about. Instead, the Early Years Learning Framework Learning Outcomes need to be seen as the product of many (perhaps hundreds) of different experiences that all build on each other over time.

If we don’t recognise this then we will continue to plan for and provide experiences in isolation. Such experiences may well be good experiences, but they will fail to bring about the kind of learning we are hoping for if they aren’t part of a longer-term plan that sees achievement of the outcomes as the result of accumulated learning.

To make an assessment of such long-term learning is much harder than assessing (or assuming) what may have happened from a single experience. It is, however, also much more accurate. If we want to make our assessment of children’s learning useful, we need to be realistic about the learning that is actually occurring and we need to change our thinking so we can effectively plan for, assess and support this learning over the long term.

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