

**ASSESSMENT IN EARLY YEARS: THE ROLE OF FAMILIES****Felicia M. ODUNTAN**Lord's Schools, Abojupa Scheme, Eleekara, Ilora  
feliciaoduntan@gmail.com**Abstract**

*Assessment in early childhood education is a paramount discourse in education because there is need to make well informed decisions on the younger ones so as to monitor their learning, growth and development. However, in achieving this, family plays key roles especially, in terms of provision of information on the child's personality. Information gathered from the family is critical for identifying the child's strengths and needs which help in making informed decisions about the goals of the early childhood education. This paper therefore, explores roles of the family in the assessment of the recipients of early childhood education. Bringing into fore, the concept of assessment, importance of assessment, different methods of assessing children, roles of family in assessment in early childhood education. The paper concludes by highlighting the needs to involve and engage families in the assessment of early years.*

**Keywords:** Family, Practitioners, Early years, Assessment, Evaluation**Introduction**

Assessment in early childhood education is a tool used to gather and supply educators and families with critical information about a child's development and growth. Assessment in Early childhood education may be a process of gathering information about a child, reviewing the information and then using the information to plan educational activities and make informed decision about the child (Catherine, Snow and Susan, Van eds, 2008). Assessment can also be defined as the ways in which in everyday practice, children's learning are observed, strive to understand it, and then put understanding to good use (Early Childhood Care resource, 2020).

According to (McLachlan 2021) assessment helps educators learn about children and identifies ways to support their learning and development. Assessment is a critical part of a high-quality, early childhood programme. When educators do an assessment, a child is being observed to get information about what the child knows and what the child can do. Observing and documenting a child's work and performance over the course of a year allows an educator to accumulate a record of the child's growth and development. With this information, educators can begin to plan appropriate curriculum and effective individualised instruction for each child (Judy, Jablon, Amy & Margo, 2007). Assessment record is also a great tool to share with parents so they can follow their child's progress at school, understand their child's strengths and challenges, and plan how they can help extend the learning into their homes (Stacie and Valora, 2007).

**Concept of Assessment**

According to (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004), assessment provides educators and families with critical information about a child's development

and growth. Assessment provides a record of growth in all development areas: cognitive, physical/motor, language, social-emotional and approaches to learning. It identifies children who may need additional support and determine if there is a need for intervention or support services. It also helps educators plan individualised instruction for a child or for a group of children that are at the same stage of development. In addition, it identifies the strengths and weaknesses within a programme and provide information on how well the programme meets the goals and needs of the children. It provides a common ground between educators and parents or families to use in collaborating on a strategy to support their child.

An essential practice for assessment in early childhood education is the identification of the routines, activities, and events that occur regularly for children and families within the community. Gathering information about family history and day to day activities and how they engage in the tasks of everyday life is pivotal to the identification of authentic outcomes and the initiation of intervention that has the likelihood of creating a difference (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1995; Bernheimer & Weismer, 2007; McWilliam & Scott, 2001). However, early childhood educators are challenged on multiple levels to gather this information. First, they are seeking personal information about the intricate workings of a family while developing rapport and building relationship. Second, this sensitive task is amplified as information are sought from the family members while learning about their child's special needs, the early intervention services and supports available, and the professionals and systems that provide them (Fialka, 2000).

There are different ways of approaching the assessment of children's learning. Sometimes focused and purposeful observations can assess a specific area of a child's learning. At other times observation are getting to be open and fluid that can assess what emerges from the observation. Both are valid ways of assessing children's learning (Directorate for Education, 2012). Some samples of what will determine from observation are: What children enjoy and are interested in friendships, identifying specific learning needs, following up something that have been noticed informally and to seek out more, well-being, what a child is capable of within a particular area of development – physical, intellectual, language, emotional, social; which schemas children are developing, starting points of intervention what a child knows and can do which will establish a child's developmental progress/level, to urge to understand a child better – open-ended.

### **Parental/Family Roles in the Assessment of Early Childhood Education**

Current formative assessment practices are vastly different to the assessment methods experienced by the parents of today's school children. Involving parents in formative assessment is a useful way of engaging with parents on a meaningful level. It also has numerous benefits for children (Bartsch, 2022). It is entirely understandable that parents educated decades ago will not be familiar with the notion of how they can play an active role in their child's assessment for learning. Parents probably only learnt of an issue in the classroom once a report card is received by which time and opportunity to help had long passed. Disappointing results were punished, or sighed over, positive results were met with reward or relief, and that was the extent of parental involvement. Influence of parents and guardian cannot be underestimated upon children learning success (Briggs, 2013). Consequently, it is important for the teachers to communicate the assessment strategies, and the reason they are being used, right from the outset. Once parents understand the role to play in helping their children to achieve success, parents usually delight in being able to be part of the process.

Lindeman (2017) spelt out how parents should be involved in assessment. The process should be duly explained to them. They should be made to understand how it helps their child progress. A meeting should be called at the start of the year, invite parents and children to come and find out about how assessment for learning works in classroom. Explain how making mistakes assists learning, that is, beneficial to take risks with the safe learning environment. Agree that giving and receiving feedback, taking time to self-assess, and developing student autonomy, are essential elements of effective learning.

Communication is also an important aspect of children assessment the more parents are communicated, the more they will trust the educator looking after the best interests of their children. Thus, the more be supported. Parents love to know what their kids are learning about, email them at the start of each topic with some suggested questions to ask. Regular communications updating parents on their child's progress. This is an easy way of involving parents in the learning journey. It helps parents feel they can contribute to classroom. Parents may decide to support the learning through their own excursions and conversations, a fantastic and beneficial outcome.

Another way of making parents to exercise their role is for educator to share work samples regularly. Parents often do not have much idea about what standard of work of their child should be producing, simply compare their child's work to others they see around the classroom does not tell the whole story. Regularly sharing work samples with parents enables them to get a better appreciation of their child's progress. They will therefore be better placed to understand and support any additional scaffolding or extension work educator utilizes. Using portfolios can be an ideal way to share work samples and encourage children autonomy. Furthermore, written feedback could be provided where appropriate, practitioners know the teaching and learning benefits of providing meaningful feedback, but often the feedback is provided verbally. When students communicate back to parents the essence is often lost in providing meaningful written feedback to both children and parents. It is certain that such feedback is effective.

Another means of allowing parents to play their role is by holding children-led parent teacher conferences to communicate children's progress. The idea behind this is that children are able to explain why they are in a certain way. This helps children become more self-aware in their learning habits. A fair amount of preparation is necessary for successful children-led conferences. A framework must be created for children to lean on during the conference. Ask children to select key pieces, in which they felt they learned the most, or that best illustrates their learning, children may write a reflection on their learning journey and study habits, and set goals for the next term. In the days leading up to the conference, teachers should role play with the children to enable them to practice leading the conference. Most parents appreciate children taking responsibility for their learning.

There are widespread benefits in providing opportunities for parents to understand and appreciate children's efforts, signs of progress and achievement over time, involving parents in assessment can provide teachers with each child's learning. It also helps parent's better support student motivation and learning. Parents welcome the opportunity to be involved in assisting and improving their children's outcomes. Teachers need all the support to open doors for communication (Uzosike Ngozi, 2018)

Parents' involvement leads to children's success. The best predictor of children's success is the extent to which families encourage learning at home and involve themselves in their child's education (PTA, 2000). When parents are engaged in their children's school lives, pupils have the

home support and knowledge they need not only to finish their assignments, but also develop a lifelong love of learning. Teachers who focus on parents' engagement often see a profound change in their classrooms. The more parents are involved in their children's education, the better their entire class motivation, behaviour, and grades become. Encouraging parent engagement is more than common courtesy. It is one of the best ways to create a positive learning environment for every child (Child Trend, 2018).

According to (Waterford, 2018), the definition of parent engagement is parents and teachers sharing responsibilities to help their children learn and meet educational goals. Parents' engagement happens when teachers involve parents in school meeting or events and parents volunteer their support at home and at school. In this way, they make a commitment. Parents commit to prioritising their child's educational goals, and teachers commit to listening and providing a space for collaboration with parents. Parents' engagement in schools is different from parents' involvement, though both are useful. Parent involvement is when parents participate in school events or activities, and teachers provide learning resources or information about their children's grade. Unlike in parent engagement, teachers hold the primary responsibility to set educational goals. They relate to parents not as a partner but an advisor who guides them through academic support for their child.

It helps to think of parent involvement as the first step to parent engagement. While teachers can advise parents on some things, parents also have important information about their child that teachers might not know. Both can bring perspectives to the table that enriches a child's learning experience. Neither is complete without the other. As noted by Ferlazzo (2011) in his article "involvement or Engagement?" A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth-identifying projects, needs and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears-listening to what parents think, dream and worry about (Ferlazzo, 2011).

If a parent-teacher relationship was not established early in the year, parents also may not know whether they are welcome at school. Some groups however, are more at-risk for low parent engagement. Parent involvement is lowest in families below the poverty line or with older children, as well as parents who do not speak the areas primary language or did not graduate high school (Trends, 2018).

When parents and teachers work together to establish a thriving classroom, the effect on their children is profound. Students with engaged parents do not just have high test scores, their attendance, self-esteem, and graduation rate rise too. Parent-teacher relationships are more than an optional classroom benefits. They are keys for helping children on a personal and classroom level reach their academic potential. If educators do not make a space for parent partnership, classroom's capacity for growth are limited (Waterford, 2018). When parents engage in their children's assessment such earn higher grades or test scores (American Psychological Association), graduate from higher school and attend post-secondary education (Grand Rapids Public School District, 2018). Children develop self-confidence and motivation in the classroom (Wairimu, 2016), have better social skills and classroom behaviour. They are also likely to:

Across fifty different studies on parental engagement, educational researchers found a connection between family involvement and academic achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009) and the earlier educators establish parent engagement, the more effective they are in raising learner performance. Parent partnerships formed during elementary school years build a strong foundation for student success and future engagement opportunities (Dearing, Krelder, Simpkins

& Weiss, 2006). Parent engagement also decreases chronic absenteeism, or missing more than twenty days of a school year. When teachers engaged with parents through home visits, for example, children absences dropped by 20% (Sheldon & Jung, 2015).

Even after accounting for grade level and previous absences, children with engaged parents report less days of school missed overall (Epstein & Sheldon, 2004). Two-way communication between parents and teachers do too. Teachers can prepare parents to help with homework or academic concepts. And engaged parents tend to think highly of teachers, which improves teacher morale. Knowing more about a children's family life can also help prepare lessons that better fit that child's needs or interact more efficiently with families. Children who receive more support, classrooms with engaged parents perform better as a whole (Henderson & Berla, 1995). When parents and teachers team up, everyone wins.

### **Different Methods of Assessing Children in Early Childhood Education**

Methods of assessing children in early childhood education can be informal (conducting natural observations, collecting data and children's work for portfolios, using educator and teacher ratings) and formal (using assessment tools such as questionnaires and standardized testing). Both methods are effective and can help inform educators and parents about child's progress (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004).

Observations can be made with minimal or no intrusion into children's activities. Educators can observe all facets of development, including intellectual, linguistic, social-emotional and physical development on a regular basis. Child observation is the method of watching, listening, asking questions, documenting and analysing the observed words and actions of children as they interact with their surroundings and other people (Safety Culture, 2022). Proper observation in children is crucial in helping educators and parents address the needs of early childhood development. Observing and assessing children's learning can also enhance educator's knowledge and understanding of how children develop and learn. Detailed, careful, attentive observation, followed by well-informed assessment, can show educators how children make meaning in their world, how they use and develop their language to enable them to communicate with others and to think. Educators can learn how children develop and maintain relationships, and how they develop emotionally and morally. This dynamic to observation and assessment enable educators to go beyond the idea of normative developmental expectations and outcomes measures and enable educators to really see, and celebrate children as individuals (Smidt, 2005).

Children are observed for variety of reasons. ascertain what each child knows and can do and is interested in and how he/she learns best so as to support their learning and development effectively. Assessment is also carried out to support overall planning and provision for each child and match approaches and interactive strategies to children's needs in order to best support their learning and development (Thornton, Brunton, and Green, 2007).

Observing children's play and learning is an excellent way of enhancing professional knowledge. Children are endlessly surprising. If educators limit observation to collecting information to assess children against developmental norms and prescribed criteria, a lot will be missed of the richness of their play. Drummond (1993) articulates this well:

*If we choose to see only those aspects of learning of which we approve, we will lose the opportunity to see more of the picture, to learn more about learning... there is always more to learn and more to see. By being attentive and open to actually seeing*

*what children know and can do we can learn from them. We may make clearer connections between theory and practice; we may observe things that we need to think about and reflect upon in order to understand exactly what was happening; we may see things that confound our expectations about individual children and/or expected development progress and stages. All of these enhance our professional knowledge and skill and enable us to develop a more sophisticated understanding of young children's learning and development. (p. 148)*

Different observation techniques need to be used to elicit different information. It is important that the information that is gathered in observation is appropriate and sufficiently detailed to make accurate assessment of children's learning (Smidt, 2005) selecting an appropriate observation technique to gather information is an important part of this process. Different techniques according to Smidt (2005) include: time sampling; tracking; checklists; target child; learning stories and documenting.

**Time sampling** involves completing a short narrative observation of a child at 10 – 15 minutes intervals. This gives quite a broad overview of the child in the setting. Assessment of the observation can be focused across many areas, as appropriate. The same technique can be used for activities. An activity is observed every 10 – 15 minutes. Again, this offers a broad range of possibilities for assessment.

**Tracking observations** follow children's choices within the setting. These choices (including time children spent between activities and any time spent observing others) and the time that the child spends there are recorded. It can be also recorded who else was at the activity and briefly how the child engaged with the activity/experience. Again, this offers a broad view of the child in the setting and assessment can be focused on what is needed to know.

**Checklists** are pre-determined lists that identify knowledge, skills or aptitudes. The purpose of observation is to ascertain whether a child meet these criteria. These can be useful if there is need to find out something particular and precise. However, generally checklists are not sufficiently sophisticated enough way of capturing the richness of young children's learning but it is a supportive instrument.

**Target child observations** are ones in which identify a particular child to observe. Researcher may be looking at something in particular or completing an open-ended observation. In this observation, the child is observed within the learning environment alongside other children. This gives the child the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do within their familiar environment alongside their peers. The activity that the child is involved in is briefly recorded narratively and then language and social interactions are recorded and coded to give an accurate account of what happened during the observation for analysis and interpretation.

**Learning stories** are a way of recording and presenting observations of children over time: building a narrative about their learning: they emerged from the work of Carr (2001) and are based in socio-cultural theory. Carr articulates a way of recording children's learning that acknowledges the context of that learning. She called these learning stories. The idea is to create a narrative, a strong, recorded as a series of episodes linked together that record what the child

knows and can do, and, record what comes next. This is important. The purpose of recording children's learning in learning stories is to enhance their learning, to foreground what they can do as a starting point for providing for their ongoing development, and to recognize the complexity of the context and process of learning. The idea of learning story is interpreted in a number of ways in practice. Some settings have formatted their observation sheets to create narrative threads linked to next steps in learning. Others have adopted a portfolio approach, in which observations and examples of children's work are kept together to create a narrative of their progress in the setting. Assessment of children's learning takes place at each stage of recording of the learning story in the analysis of the observation to define the next steps.

Documenting children's learning is another way of creating a narrative about what a child has done and achieved. Providing documentary evidence of children's learning recorded through observations and examples of children's work, usually kept as a portfolio or folder of which children and staff and parents can all contribute to, is well established in early years. Integrating parents into the assessment process is a welcome development. Parents who are encouraged to observe and listen to their child can help detect and target important milestones and behaviours in their child's development.

It is important that in using different observational techniques to record and assess young children's learning, practitioners are clear about the purpose of what they are doing and that the observational and recording processes are matched to this aim. Also, that the process enables practitioners and parents to have a good understating of what children know and can do and through analysis and interpretation of observation and or documentation they are able to adapt and refine their provision and pedagogical processes to best meet the needs of the children (NAEYC, 2004).

Furthermore, it should be noted that standardized test also can be utilized. These are tests created to fit a set of testing standards. These tests are administered in score in a standard manner and are often used to assess the performance of children in a programme but it should be age appropriate (National Research Council, 2008).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The role of family in the assessment of children in early childhood education is pertinent therefore it should be treated as such. Early childhood assessment is very pertinent to the development and growth of the child. Assessment is important because it provides educators, parents and families with critical information about a child development and growth. Parents' involvement and engagement are equally pertinent to the development of the child. Different types of assessment can be utilized in gathering information about a child. This will enable informed decisions about the child.

Assessment of young children is a herculean task. Therefore, various practitioners and caregivers/parents must be aware of the technicalities and the tasking effort in assessing preschoolers. Hence, thorough knowledge of assessment is a must so as to get the best from the child. As a result, parents and practitioners should be trained on the process of assessing and monitoring the growth and progress of young children. It is important to note that in dealing with children, flexibility and empowering communication strategies to gather and give information to families as new priorities and interests developed contrary to the more traditional ways in which it has been planned is needed to be enhanced. Service providers should be prepared for multiple strategies of gathering and giving information to families so as to cater for diverse learning styles

and interests of families and caregivers. Teachers and parents should collaborate in order to provide robust information to enhance teaching and learning of children.

Furthermore, periodic seminars and workshops can be organised for parents in order to disseminate and enlighten them on the need to be involved in the assessment of their children. Assessment as a critical part of high-quality early childhood programme should be thoroughly mastered by practitioners and parents in order to bring the best out of the child and to enhance the development of curriculum for the child. Also, involvement of parents in the assessment of children helps parents to follow their children's progress at school, understand their children's strengths and challenges and plan how they can help extend the learning into their homes, this aspect must be strengthened by the practitioners so as to bring the best out of the child.

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