

Co-Constructing the Life Stories of Young Children's Learning: A Developmentally Appropriate Approach to Early Childhood Assessment

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Abstract: In early childhood education settings, learning assessment should not be understood merely as a technical instrument for verifying learning outcomes. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a life narrative process in which teachers and young children jointly participate and continuously co-construct educational meaning. Through systematic observation, dialogic interaction, documentation, and reflective practice embedded in everyday teaching contexts, teachers are able to understand how children make sense of their worlds and how they express their abilities, interests, and potential through interaction and exploration with peers, environments, and learning materials. These process-oriented learning moments are not isolated events but are interwoven to form each child's unique "learning story." From this perspective, the core meaning of viewing teaching practice as a co-written life story lies in repositioning assessment as a relational and ethically grounded professional practice. Its purpose is to accompany children's developmental trajectories, to understand the contexts of their learning, and to respond to their continuously emerging learning needs, rather than to evaluate learning performance through unilateral, static, or standardized measures. This study aims to investigate the practices of early childhood learning assessment, with a particular focus on co-constructing children's learning narratives—beginning with developmentally appropriate assessment.

Keywords: A body movement-oriented approach, intergenerational learning, older adults, young children

1. Introduction

Within this theoretical framework, developmentally appropriate assessment in early childhood education is inherently a child-centered and process-oriented approach. This perspective emphasizes respect for individual differences in children's age, experiences, cultural backgrounds, and learning pace, prioritizes learning processes over outcomes, and seeks to understand children's development in authentic learning and life contexts through diverse, longitudinal, and contextualized methods of observation and documentation. The purpose of assessment is not to select, compare, or categorize children, but to support teachers' professional judgment as a basis for curriculum and instructional adjustment, thereby promoting children's ongoing learning and holistic development (Shepard, 2000). In this sense, children are genuinely "seen" and "understood" through the assessment process, and teaching is no longer confined to the transmission of knowledge or the measurement of competencies. Instead, it becomes a life narrative rich in relationality, care, and educational meaning—one that is co-authored by teachers and young children.

2. Every Child as a Unique Individual

The term assessment is commonly traced to its Latin root meaning "to sit beside," which underscores an epistemological stance of proximity and attentiveness in understanding young children's learning. Within early childhood education, assessment is therefore conceptualized not as a detached or purely technical procedure but as a relational and interpretive practice through which teachers attend closely to children's meaning-making processes, developmental progress, and emerging challenges over time. From this perspective, the central purpose of assessment is to render each child visible within the educational process. Through systematic, ongoing, and contextually embedded assessment practices, teachers are able to document individual learning trajectories, generate evidence of learning from everyday pedagogical interactions, and communicate children's learning processes and outcomes to families. Furthermore, teaching in early childhood education is inherently intentional and goal oriented. Assessment serves a critical reflective function by enabling teachers to examine the coherence between curricular intentions, learning environment design, and children's developmental

capacities. Through continuous cycles of assessment and reflection, teachers are able to critically interrogate their pedagogical decisions, adjust instructional strategies, and engage in sustained professional learning aimed at enhancing the quality and responsiveness of teaching and learning (Lai, 2021).

Every child is a unique individual. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, experience diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and developmental conditions that create an urgent need for learning approaches responsive to their individual characteristics and needs. For this reason, developmentally appropriate education—and, by extension, developmentally appropriate teaching and assessment—holds particular significance. In early childhood education, learning assessment serves as a critical mechanism for informing teachers' curricular and pedagogical adjustments. Only through systematic assessment of children's learning processes can educators gain insight into children's developmental trajectories and learning experiences. Moreover, early childhood learning assessment constitutes a core professional competency in early childhood education, as it directly influences teachers' ability to understand children's developmental contexts, adapt instructional strategies, and respond to individual differences.

3. The Theoretical Foundations of Early Childhood Learning Assessment

Assessments provide teachers with essential information regarding children's learning. Alternative education systems offer insight into ways that assessments can be redesigned to be developmentally appropriate to particular ages, including unique stances on what defines assessment, who should assess, and what should be assessed (Becker, Rigaud & Epstein, 2023). In addition, the theoretical foundations of early childhood learning assessment can be broadly categorized as follows. (1) Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conceptualizes Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as an approach to early childhood education that emphasizes alignment with children's developmental characteristics, cultural responsiveness, and sensitivity to individual interests and needs. Within the DAP framework, assessment is understood as an integral component of teaching and learning rather than as a separate or technical procedure. Key principles of DAP-informed assessment include: prioritizing observation and interaction in naturalistic learning contexts over paper-and-pencil testing; ensuring that assessment outcomes reflect children's holistic competencies and learning processes rather than isolated skills; and using assessment primarily to inform instructional adjustment and pedagogical decision-making, rather than for purposes of classification, selection, or academic tracking. From this perspective, assessment functions as a formative and reflective practice that supports children's ongoing development. The DAP framework has exerted a profound influence on contemporary approaches to early childhood assessment. Its core principles are closely aligned with Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes child-centered learning and respect for individual differences. Empirical and conceptual studies in Taiwan have likewise highlighted the compatibility between DAP-oriented assessment practices and local early childhood educational contexts. Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of grounding early childhood assessment in developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and pedagogically meaningful practices (McAfee, Leong & Bodrova, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2017, 2022; NAEYC, 2020; Shao & Shih, 2024; Shih & Chang, 2023; Shih, 2022, 2024; Ye & Shih, 2021).

4. Reflections: Strengthening the Dialogue with Learning Stories and Formative Assessment

The conceptualization of early childhood assessment as a co-authored life narrative resonates strongly with the theoretical foundations of Learning Stories as articulated by Carr (2001). Learning Stories reposition assessment as a narrative, interpretive, and relational practice that foregrounds children's strengths, learning dispositions, and participation in meaningful contexts, rather than their deficits or standardized performance outcomes. From this perspective, assessment is not a neutral act of measurement but a socially situated process of meaning-making, in which teachers interpret children's learning in relation to values, purposes, and educational aspirations. Learning Stories thus align closely with the view that teaching and assessment constitute an ongoing dialogic process, co-constructed through observation, documentation, interpretation, and reflective response. Central to Learning Stories is the emphasis on *learning dispositions*—such as curiosity, perseverance, responsibility, and collaboration—which are understood as emerging through children's engagement with people, places, and activities over time (Carr & Lee, 2012). This focus extends assessment beyond the evaluation of discrete skills toward a more holistic understanding of learning as participation and becoming. In doing so, Learning Stories challenge traditional assessment paradigms that privilege norm-referenced comparison and linear developmental progression, and instead support a strengths-based, culturally responsive, and contextually grounded approach to understanding children's learning trajectories. This narrative and interpretive orientation also situates Learning Stories firmly within the broader tradition of formative assessment. Formative assessment is commonly defined as assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning, emphasizing the use of evidence about learners' understanding to inform instructional decisions and

support ongoing development (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Shepard, 2000). In early childhood education, formative assessment is inherently embedded in daily pedagogical interactions, where teachers continuously observe, interpret, and respond to children's learning in situ. Learning Stories exemplify this formative function by transforming assessment information into pedagogical action—informing curriculum planning, shaping learning environments, and guiding responsive teaching strategies. Moreover, both Learning Stories and formative assessment foreground the ethical and relational dimensions of assessment practice. Rather than positioning children as passive recipients of evaluation, these approaches recognize children as competent participants whose learning is shaped through relationships, dialogue, and shared meaning-making. Documentation becomes not merely a record of achievement but a communicative tool that connects teachers, children, and families, thereby extending assessment beyond the classroom into broader learning communities (Carr, 2001; Drummond, 2003).

When situated within Taiwan's early childhood education context, the integration of Learning Stories and formative assessment further reinforces the child-centered and process-oriented principles articulated in the Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2017, 2022). Both theoretical perspectives support assessment practices that are developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and pedagogically meaningful. Together, they provide a robust conceptual foundation for viewing early childhood assessment not as a mechanism of control or classification, but as a reflective professional practice that sustains children's learning, supports teacher inquiry, and nurtures educational relationships.

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