

Maryela: Embedding Authentic Assessment in Everyday Practices

The following case study is based on a true story. It was written as part of a larger body of work (See Shamblott, 2005) and has been excerpted here to illustrate the importance of embedding authentic assessment in the everyday classroom environment.

A few years ago, I went on a home visit to register a 4-year-old girl named Maryela for the summer school program I was teaching in. I didn't know much about her family except for the comments that the outreach worker had passed along on the Outreach Notes. The information included the following: Mexican-American family, mom speaks some English, new to community, Maryela has never been away from mom.

When I arrived, Maryela was in the kitchen with her mother, grandmother, and siblings. They invited me to sit at the kitchen table and offered me a tall glass of Coca Cola to sip on through my stay. We sat together as Maryela's mom completed the required paperwork and we chatted a little about the program. I asked what Maryela liked to do and she told me she liked cooking, cleaning, and caring for her new baby brother Pedro.

When the paperwork was complete, I returned back to school where over the next several days I worked on arranging the classroom environment for the upcoming session. I moved the furniture, created learning centers, set-up equipment, materials, and classroom supplies. I also worked on my curriculum plans, while reflecting on the overall program goals and objectives, which included having the children participate in a positive and developmentally appropriate educational experience.

As I worked on my plans, my mind wandered back to the visit at Maryela's house (as well as my visits with the other families too) and I tried to remember what it was like to go to school for the first time. I knew the experience would be exciting with all the toys and materials and children, but also filled with unfamiliarity and uncertainty with everything so new. To help ease and support the transition from home to school, I decided to create a special plan for Maryela.

As I looked around the classroom at the learning centers in place, the dramatic playhouse seemed like the logical place to start as I remembered what her mom had shared about how she liked cook and clean and care for her new baby Pedro. I added items to the dramatic playhouse area like the ones I'd seen on the visit including objects and artifacts that were reflective of her life (e.g., Mexican food boxes, books depicting Mexican American families, photos of Mexico and Mexican American families, colorful dishes and clay artifacts, pots and pans, dishes, Hispanic/Latino dolls, familiar clothing and accessories).

This type of planning while creating the learning environment is both essential and integral to teaching and learning. Planning helps teachers prepare for the children and the learning opportunities ahead. It represents both the beginning of the process and then becomes part of an ongoing practice which continues to cycle throughout our time with children. Once started, planning is informed by observations and assessment (of what children know and can do), which is a direct result of the teaching and ultimately the learning children engage in.

Starting School

Maryela started summer school the last week in June along with 14 other children. As the bus pulled up on the first day of school, Maryela reluctantly let go of her mom's hand, boarded the bus, and found a seat. She quickly scooted all the way over and pressed her nose up against the window as she watched her mom grow smaller and smaller in the distance as the bus continued on to take her to school. This was the first time Maryela would be away from her family for an extended period of time.

I waited eagerly at the curb as the bus arrived and Maryela and the other children climbed down off the bus and gathered so we could enter the building together. After a trip down the hall, up the stairs, and around the corner we arrived at the classroom. The children entered wide-eyed and several squealed with delight when they saw all the toys and materials. We sat on the carpet and sang a morning song to welcome the children to school. We introduced ourselves and asked each child to raise their hand when we called out their names. Maryela sat quietly with the teaching assistant at her side who assisted her when it was her turn. After a few more songs and fingerplays I announced it was time to play and the children scattered in all directions.

I watched as Maryela carefully stood up and moved slowly in the direction of the playhouse. After a few moments she entered on her own. She looked around and her face brightened when she spotted the dolls. A few minutes I looked over to see Maryela busy cooking and cleaning and caring for the babies. Maryela was in the playhouse using the objects and materials that reflected her life (e.g., Mexican food boxes, books depicting Mexican American families, photos of Mexico and Mexican American families, pots and pans, dishes, Hispanic/Latino dolls, familiar clothing). The familiarity of the sights and

sounds, smells and artifacts representing her life, were helping to ease the transition from home to school.

In the next several weeks Maryela acclimated to the school routines but spent most of her time in the playhouse. I watched as she sorted the dishes, lined up food, studied the food boxes, and pretended to cook and clean. She regularly dressed and undressed the baby dolls and then carefully tucked them in to the hardwood cribs. Maryela demonstrated a wide range of skills and abilities, while taking on increasingly difficult challenges and an occasional risk (for example, on one occasion she handed a doll to another child in the playhouse and motioned her hands towards the bed).

I was able to establish a preliminary understanding about what Maryela (and the other children) could and could not do. With the information I was able to more finely tune the group learning objectives to ensure that they were reasonable and appropriate, as well as meaningful and relevant to the context of each child's life. For Maryela it was important that the initial planned activities and experiences connected to her work in the playhouse because she was comfortable and capable there. As her teacher it was my job to provide a learning experience that matched her interests, abilities, and needs.

I added more to the playhouse, including a new assortment of books written in Spanish and English along with some Spanish-language newspapers and flyers that I found at the store. I gathered a wider assortment of dress-up clothes, as well as posters and pictures depicting Mexican American people working in the community.

Together we created signs to notify others that part of the playhouse was going to become a Mercado (market). In preparation the children helped me sort the fruits and vegetables into color-coded bins as we discussed what kinds of prepared foods we would

serve in the deli. After much discussion (and a vote) the children decided on fried plantains (banana-like fruit), churros (delicious baked pastry sticks rolled in cinnamon and sugar), and arroz (rice). Food boxes were organized by size and shape and paper bags from a store in town were folded and stacked to prepare for the customers.

We talked about the different jobs that people have at the market as we studied the photographs I had collected. Several of the children called out what they wanted to be. Some wanted to be the cashier, while others were more interested in shopping. We talked about who would manage the store and who would stock the shelves when as they grew empty. We made paper money, added a cash register, and all the children (including Maryela) helped me count the coins.

Intentional teaching is at the heart of what we do day to day when we work with children in early education settings. It's a time to focus on the early learning standards and objectives and to introduce a combination of new and familiar concepts and skills. Teaching provides multiple opportunities to help children make connections to one another and the curriculum content, while supporting and nurturing growth and development in all the learning domains (social, emotional, cognitive, creative, language and literacy). Ideally, teaching becomes part of a regular daily practice, and continues to cycle as we interact and work with children. Good teaching is dependent on ongoing observations and continuous planning, which drives and informs decisions about what to teach.

Assessing Maryela

Throughout the session I continued to observe the children immersing themselves in new learning experiences. I watched as Maryela engaged in small and large group

activities, while continuing to spend a large portion of her time in the playhouse (often engaged in parallel play).

As part of the early childhood education program requirements, we assessed the children's performance and progress in several developmental domains reflecting Minnesota's early learning standards over the course of the 6-week summer session. Reflecting on the program's overarching goal to meet the education needs of each child (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment), I prepared to "assess" Maryela's skills and abilities in the context and setting that was most familiar to her - the playhouse.

I snapped photos to document her emergent writing skills and collected samples of her creations made with paper and pencils, crayons, scissors, and tape. I replenished the supplies frequently so she would have the resources available to fully demonstrate her achievements in authentic ways. I saved a variety of written lists (i.e., groceries, family members, favorite foods), as well as notes to her family, pretend phone messages, take-out orders, recipes, grocery receipts, and vegetable tallies. I collected different kinds of data to show evidence of varying aspects of her emerging skills. I documented how she used writing for a variety of purposes with anecdotal notes and video taped her reading to the babies each day. I checked items on a matrix to indicate the book behaviors she was demonstrating and noted that she often selected the stories we read at story time, looked through informational texts, and studied the market flyers posted on the wall.

I took brief notes recording instances of her speaking with other children recording carefully who she spoke with, what they discussed (if I could hear them), and where in the classroom it happened so I could help support her efforts, as well as her social

development as she interacted more and more frequently with her peers. I documented her conversations with the assistant teacher who frequently joined her in dramatic play.

Maryela's mathematical thinking and physical development skills could easily be assessed in the playhouse too! I observed as she stacked the play dishes by color and then matched them to the same-colored cup, fork, spoon, and knife before she set the table so the customers could have their lunch. She also spent time working in the grocer's deli where she counted ingredients for recipes and filled various sized measuring cups with sand. I was able to document her fine and gross motor skills, as well as her adherence to rules of health and safety.

I gathered authentic data (based on skills performed within the everyday classroom experience) to help me evaluate Maryela's performance and progress in an accurate and appropriate way. At the end of the session, I sat with each child's assessment folder and carefully reviewed the information. Using guidelines outlining developmentally-appropriate expectations for young children ages 4-5 years, I methodically evaluated each child's individual achievements. I read through observation notes, reviewed documentation, and completed checklists for each child guided by a research-based set of child development guidelines and rationales. I reviewed portfolio samples of student work and looked at items reflecting each child's interests, strengths, and favorite work, etc. Narrative summaries reports were written and shared with the families (along with the portfolio), and passed on to the next teacher as part of the transition to kindergarten.

This is what assessment looks like when it is embedded into the early learning environment and it becomes part of the ongoing daily practice of getting to know children deeply, continuous planning, highly intentional teaching, and a commitment to observing,

documenting, and evaluating children's learning. Assessment drives and informs our decisions about what to plan so we can reach and teach children in the most effective and appropriate ways.

Shamblott, M. (2005). *Giving voice to children's learning: A critical examination of silencing in America's public schools and programs*. Lambert Academic Publishing, Germany.