Using Portfolio Assessments With Young Children Who Are at Risk for School Failure

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Evaluating school readiness for preschool children is a challenging task for any teacher. The task is further complicated when teachers are asked to assess school readiness for a child who is at risk of developmental delay(s). Cognition that eventually supports academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, classroom language skills) comprises school readiness for preschool age children (Cook, Tessier, & Klein, 2000). Despite subtle changes in practice, the developmental performance of young children is still predominantly measured using norm-referenced assessments (Cook et al., 2000; McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). Problems associated with the use of this type of assessment for children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay(s) have been widely documented (Cook et al., 2000; Greenspan & Meisels, 1994; McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). Criticisms include (a) the inability to assess functional skills of young children (Greenspan & Meisels, 1994; Neisworth & Bagnaio, 1992) and (b) misleading results that produce inappropriate educational placements and/or recommendations (Greenspan & Meisels, 1994). An alternative approach to the appraisal of school readiness for this population is the use of portfolio assessments.

What Is Portfolio Assessment?

A portfolio assessment is an individual collection of daily drawings, photographs, writing samples, audiotapes, video recordings, and other materials that provide visual and/or auditory documentation of a child’s strengths (Meisels & Steele, 1991; Schipper & Rossi, 1997). Portfolio assessments provide an authentic, naturalistic, and useful approach to assessing young children. They are also valuable in measuring school readiness and monitoring individual child performance by providing a practical means of illustrating “efforts, progress and achievements over time” (McLean, Bailey, & Worley, 1996, p. 64).

Reetz (1995) and Swicegood (1994) have identified several types of portfolio assessments (see Table 1) including: (a) a showcase portfolio (collection of the child’s best work), (b) a reflective portfolio (focuses on specific dimension of learning), (c) a cumulative portfolio (items that are collected over time), and (d) a goal-based portfolio (preestablished objectives). Teachers can add progress notes, anecdotal observations, and checklists in support of the work samples (Gelfer & Perkins, 1998). The actual portfolio can be stored in a variety of creative ways such as a large pizza box, x-ray sleeves, file boxes, and/or large hanging files.

The following steps are typical in completing a portfolio assessment:

Identify type of portfolio assessment and supporting rationale

Example: Dominick speaks Spanish fluently at home and in school. He is beginning to use English in his classroom setting on a consistent basis during play interactions with his peers. However, he continues to be quiet and shy around adults. At the end of the first 9-week progress period, his teacher administered a standardized assessment in a 1:1 situation. The results of this assessment did not fully demonstrate Dominick’s skills and abilities. Several items on the standardized test were not demonstrated in the 1:1 situation, even though they have been observed in large group settings. Based on the discrepancy in his performance, the teacher decides to use a showcase portfolio (i.e., a collection of the child’s best work) to provide a comprehensive view of his developmental skills across settings.

Identify all areas that will be assessed (e.g., gross motor, literacy, numeracy, fine motor, social)
Example: Since Dominick is more verbal and interactive with peers, it will be important to include samples of his best work across all developmental domains. The use of a showcase portfolio will allow his teacher to demonstrate the consistency of these skills across settings.

Identify specific questions that will be answered through the use of the portfolio

Example: Since the portfolio will be used to showcase Dominick’s performance, it will be important to formulate questions that describe his current strengths and what he needs to work on to prepare for his transition to kindergarten. In the cognitive domain, the portfolio should provide evidence that demonstrates Dominick’s ability to recognize letters and numbers. Another prerequisite skill for kindergarten is the ability to recognize his first name. This process of identifying questions to accurately describe Dominick’s abilities will need to be completed for each developmental domain.

Provide activities during class time that will allow the teacher to answer the proposed questions

Example: In order to assess Dominick’s ability to recognize his first name, the teacher uses her arrival time activity. When children enter the room in the morning, they find a circular card with their name written on it and attach it to the school bus to indicate their arrival.

Literacy group time can be used to provide a naturalistic and authentic assessment of various skills. On a particular day, the teacher facilitates the activity of making alphabet soup to assess letter recognition. Uppercase letters are randomly distributed to children at the beginning of the activity. When it is an individual child’s turn to make the soup, he or she approaches the soup bowl, identifies the letter, adds it to the soup bowl, and stirs the soup. While the soup is being stirred, the other children name words that begin with the identified letter’s initial sound.

Snack time is a functional activity to assess numeracy skills. On a daily basis, the teacher chooses a helper to pass out a snack (e.g., pretzels, crackers). The snack helper approaches each child and asks him or her the amount of snack he or she would like. The snack helper counts out the appropriate amount of snack items.

Document child’s performance in the portfolio

Example: The teacher provides anecdotal notes documenting Dominick’s performance on the arrival activity. The anecdotal notes are included in the showcase portfolio. A videotape of the literacy group time activity is also included to document literacy skills. On one of the days that Dominick is selected to be the snack helper, the teacher takes a picture of him as he is counting out snack items for his peers. The photograph and a written summary of the numbers (under 10) that he was able to accurately count is included in his showcase portfolio. Documentation on similar activities is completed throughout the nine week progress period.

Storage of evidence for the portfolio

Example: Dominick decorates a large shoebox (demonstrating fine motor skills) to serve as his showcase portfolio. The teacher explains to Dominick that they can place items that he and/or his teacher are particularly proud of in his portfolio. The teacher also encourages Dominick’s parents to include work samples from home. At the end of the 9-week progress period, Dominick, his parents, and his teacher review the items in his showcase portfolio to document his progress using functional, naturalistic, and authentic assessment.

Measuring School Readiness and Monitoring Performance

Quality preschool programs provide developmentally appropriate activities to facilitate the acquisition of important academic and social skills. The effect of these activities on school readiness and individual performance (e.g., child development) is typically measured at the beginning and the end of the year. In comparison to results obtained from traditional norm-referenced measures, portfolio assessment offers a meaningful collection of work that exemplifies the child’s “interests, attitudes, range of skills, and development over a period of time” (Gelfer & Perkins, 1998, p. 44). This is an appropriate option to measure school readiness that gives the teacher functional information regarding developmental skills and can take place in inclusive classroom environments.

Benefits of Portfolio Assessment for Teachers

There are many benefits associated with the use of portfolio assessment. One is the ease and flexibility of administration. Teachers typically work with children on an individual basis to select samples to include in their portfolio (see Table 1). A reflective portfolio can be used to demonstrate a specific dimension of learning (e.g., numeracy) or a goal-

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<th>TABLE 1. Illustrations of Different Types of Portfolio Assessments</th>
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<td>Type of portfolio assessment</td>
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based portfolio can assess preestablished objectives (e.g., letter recognition). Work samples can be collected for specific periods of time (e.g., 2 months) or throughout the year in a cumulative portfolio.

Second, a showcase portfolio assessment that includes anecdotal records can enable a teacher to identify factors that encourage or discourage a child’s learning. For example, Alex may be a “hands-on” child, that is, he learns best through play and the manipulation of materials. Information introduced verbally during a circle time activity is not the most effective instructional strategy for him. In contrast, Chelsea may process information verbally and not require the same extent of play and manipulation for learning to occur.

A portfolio assessment can also help a teacher identify environmental conditions (e.g., background noise, visual cues) under which a child’s optimal learning occurs. In reviewing a videotaped clip of a literacy activity for inclusion in the portfolio, the teacher may notice that Rob, when seated near the teacher, is not distracted by classmates during story time. The same videotaped clip demonstrates that Louie is able to attend for longer periods of time when he is provided with opportunities to be actively engaged in the story (e.g., answering questions, group responding, turning pages).

A fourth benefit is that work samples included in the portfolio can provide teachers with insight as to how a child processes a difficult situation or task. A showcase portfolio reveals that Maria consistently completes simple tasks. She does not include complicated tasks in her portfolio. Thus, the teacher was able to identify the need for Maria to persist in completing challenging tasks.

Finally, portfolio assessments enable teachers to identify learning strategies of an individual child that can then be incorporated into daily classroom activity planning. For example, classroom observations indicate that Emi learns best when visual cues are paired with verbal directions and Amanda easily processes verbal cues. Therefore, the classroom teacher has identified an effective learning strategy (i.e., use of visual and auditory cues) when presenting directions for new classroom activities.

**Benefits of Portfolio Assessment for Children and Families**

Portfolio assessments provide benefits to children, especially young children who are at risk for developmental delays. An obvious benefit is that “portfolios do not compare children to other children” (Apple, 2000, p. 223). Instead, they illustrate the child’s best work, building confidence and self-esteem (Lynch & Struwing, 2000). The individual attention allows the child to experience the process of learning and assessment as enjoyable and fun. These characteristics are essential to obtain and accurately assess school readiness in a young child who is at risk of developmental delays.

The use of portfolio assessments is a strengths-based approach. It celebrates the child’s learning and acknowledges parent concerns (Shipper & Rossi, 1997). Parents can and are encouraged to be a part of their child’s portfolio. Bringing artwork from home or a videotape of a game with neighborhood children can show skills that may not be observed in the classroom. Incorporating the family and work samples from home provides a more comprehensive assessment of a young child’s school readiness skills.

**Perspective on Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolio assessment continues to support the evaluation of young children with and without risk factors of developmental delay(s) in a holistic and meaningful way (Jardine, 1996). This individual, strength-based, positive, and family-friendly approach emphasizes best practice in the assessment of young children (Sandal, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Portfolio assessment provides functional information that is helpful to teachers, families, and other professionals working with the child that easily translates into knowledge regarding school readiness, especially for children who are at risk of developmental delays.

**REFERENCES**


