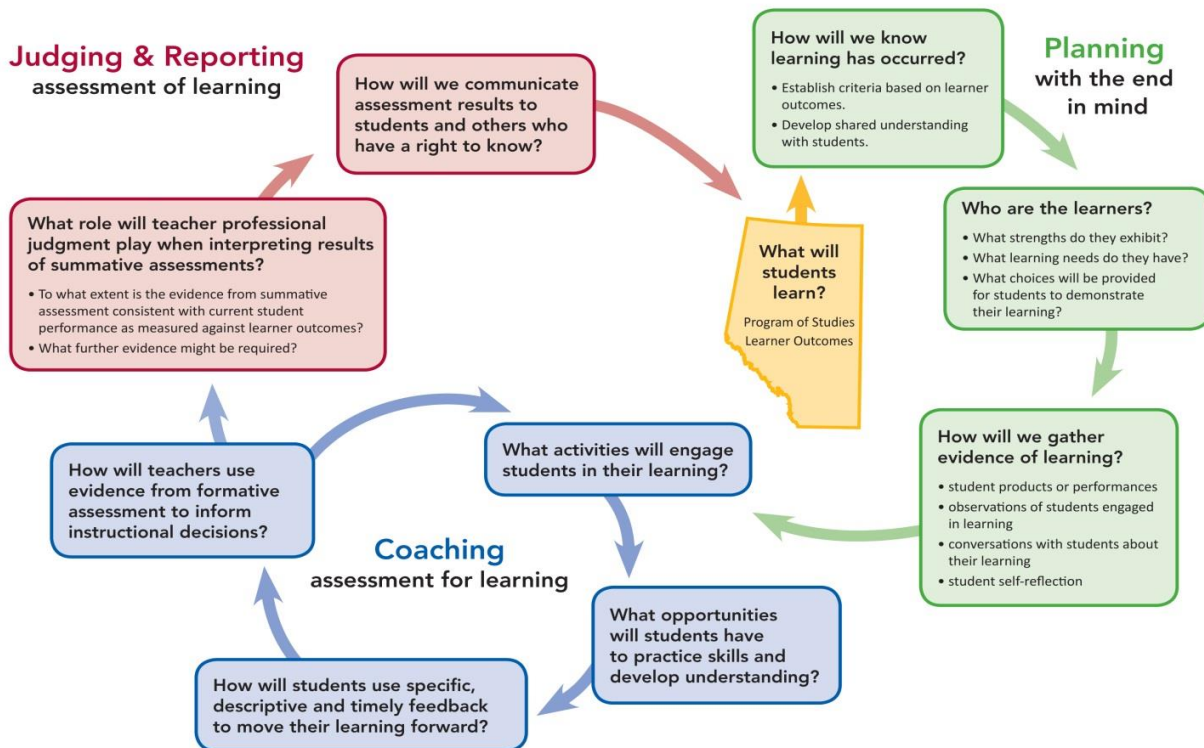


Principles of Sound Assessment Practice for Early Learning Environments: A Guide for Educators

In a previous era, the word ‘assessment’ was associated with formal tests and report cards. However, educators now view assessment through a different lens. Assessment today has more to do with teaching and learning than it does with grading and reporting. This perspective is especially applicable to early learning environments.

Organized around the key questions contained in the [AAC Key Visual](#), this document provides insight for educators regarding some essential elements of sound classroom assessment practice within early learning environments.

AAC KEY VISUAL: ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM



Planning with the End in Mind

What will students learn?

Sound classroom assessment practice begins with planning. Teachers consult subject area programs of study to ensure that instructional activities and corresponding assessments are consistent with the philosophical foundations embedded within the program documents.

Careful study of the front matter of these documents, as well as the specific and general learner outcomes, will reveal this philosophical direction. Verbs such as explore, experiment, create and develop signal the intent that early learning experiences remain play-based and experiential.

How will we know learning has occurred?

The complex language of the learner outcomes must be focused into criteria – statements beginning with strong action verbs that identify the learning to be achieved, based on the Alberta Programs of Study.

Many teachers are using “I can” statements to help make the learning target more accessible to students. Care must be taken to ensure that the “I can” statements have a direct link to a learner outcome in order to be used for assessment.

For example, while it may be desirable for Kindergarten children to develop fine motor control in order to colour within the lines, an “I can” statement in this regard does not function as a statement of assessment criteria as there is no learner outcome attached to it.

By contrast, consider the following outcome from the English Language Arts program of study.

Students will:

4.1 Enhance and Improve

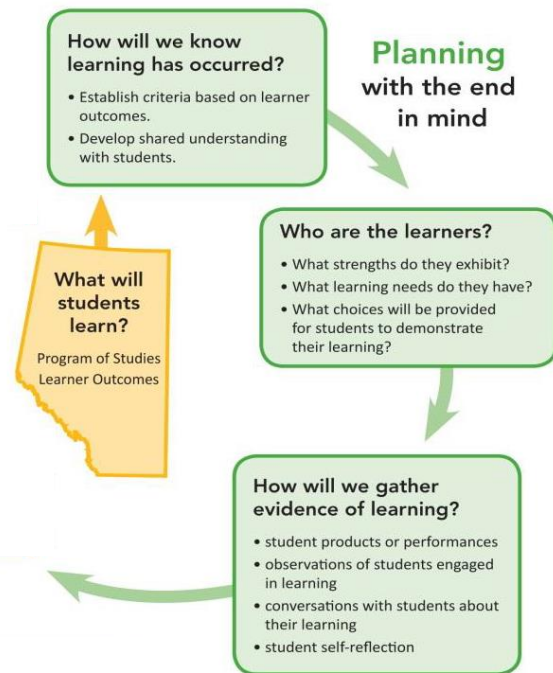
Enhance artistry

- experiment with sounds, colours, print and pictures to express ideas and feelings

An “I can” statement that could address a portion of this outcome might be phrased as follows.

I can use colour to express different feelings.

With a clear connection to the learner outcome in place, teachers can then design learning and assessment experiences that allow students to experiment with colour as a way to express feelings and then to talk about their choices. Reading the learner outcomes through the lens of assessment reveals many such metacognitive opportunities that are crucial in building a foundation for future learning.



Who are the learners?

The developmental characteristics of young children must be considered when designing assessment experiences. While there are general stages through which children progress, great variations exist relative to when children reach various developmental and learning milestones. Such variations may be further compounded by the age range of students within the classroom. Care must be taken not to allow arbitrary benchmarks such as traditional grading periods to influence summative decisions regarding student achievement levels in young learners.

The Alberta Education *Kindergarten Program Statement* lists nine guiding principles that provide a framework for Kindergarten programming.

The purpose of the guiding principles is to help Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers reflect on the nature of young children and their learning to make informed instructional decisions and create learning environments that are responsive to children's diverse needs; capabilities; learning styles; dispositions and cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds (2008, p. 1).

Parents are a rich source of information about early learners. Communication with parents is essential in order to understand students' learning needs, learning styles and preferences; to celebrate success; and to involve parents as partners in their child's learning.

How will we gather evidence of learning?

Traditional assessments tend to focus on pencil/paper activities. However, for young children, learning occurs spontaneously and other forms of assessment evidence such as observations of children at work (and play) and conversations with them about their learning will yield rich assessment evidence. Care must be taken not to presume that students don't understand a concept simply because the evidence has not yet been volunteered. Conversations with students allow teachers to prompt students to provide further information and for the teacher to diagnose and correct students' misunderstandings.

Two video clips from the AAC website provide insight into the rich assessment evidence gained by the teacher through conversations with students. The teacher commentary models how she plans to use this information in planning for future instructional opportunities, thus demonstrating how assessment can be used to *support* student learning.

Grade One Mathematics: Mr. Wheelie

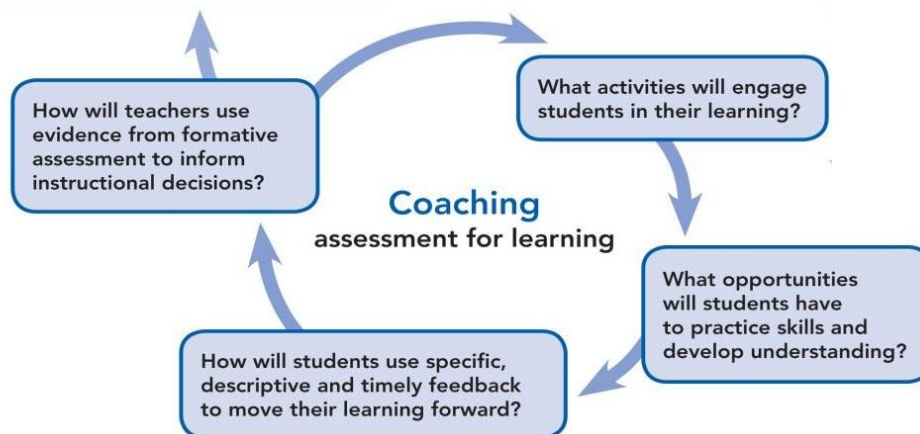
[Terry Counts Video](#) (click on Video and Student Exemplars tab)

Grade Three Mathematics: The T-Shirt Order

[Derek's Strategy Video](#) (click on Video and Student Exemplars tab)

Technology provides a mechanism for collecting photographs, video and audio recordings to be used as evidence of student learning. This is particularly helpful for young learners whose verbal skills are far more advanced than their written expression skills. When provided with appropriate support, early learners can be included in the assessment process, and their reflections on their learning are another source of information for teachers.

Coaching: Assessment for Learning



What activities will engage students in their learning?

Assessments should be child-friendly, engaging and developmentally appropriate. Assessment author and researcher Rick Stiggins asks teachers to consider what assessments they could give that their students wouldn't want to miss. Good assessment practice is indistinguishable from instruction. As such, instructional activities that are planned from the learner outcomes and with learners in mind will always provide a wealth of assessment opportunities, particularly when teachers consider that there are multiple ways to gather assessment evidence.

Performance tasks provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know and can do in situations that mirror real-life contexts. The Alberta Assessment Consortium website www.aac.ab.ca is a rich source of such assessment tasks where students have the opportunity to 'play' while they learn. Four sample tasks are described below.

Grade One Mathematics

Students work at a toy factory and are presented with a request to use 16 wheels to build some toys. They must create a plan to solve the problem that includes at least 1 bicycle and 1 tricycle and show more than one way to solve the problem.

Grade Two Science

Students will create a toy that demonstrates at least one magnetic property. They will present their toy to the president of Toys for Kids.

Grade Three Social Studies

Students will become a member of a TV broadcast team on location in Peru, Tunisia, India or Ukraine. They will research and present an oral report on a celebration or tradition in one of the four countries.

Grade Four Social Studies

Students will prepare a presentation to be shared at a town hall meeting where citizens will express their views concerning the value of national parks and protected areas.

What opportunities will students have to practice skills and develop understanding?

In the ‘real world’, multiple opportunities are provided for adults to learn and practice before they are required to perform important skills such as driving a car, flying an airplane, fixing an engine, performing surgery, or teaching a class of students. Consistent with the developmental needs of young children, students also require time to practice and to learn. Teachers should ensure that the pacing of activities allows enough time for practice and feedback. Rather than rushing an assessment task in order to comply with an arbitrary reporting period, teachers might consider the value of planning fewer assessment tasks and providing more possibilities for feedback and student reflection.

How will students use specific, descriptive and timely feedback to move their learning forward?

Quality feedback is specific, descriptive, timely, and supportive of learning. Comments such as ‘good job’ and giving stickers/stamps, although well intentioned, do not move learning forward. Consider the power of comments such as the following.

You told us lots of things about what the character did. Now can you tell us what you think the character was feeling when he/she did _____?

You used the word ‘big’ three times in your story. What other words could you use instead to help the reader know how big the animal really was?

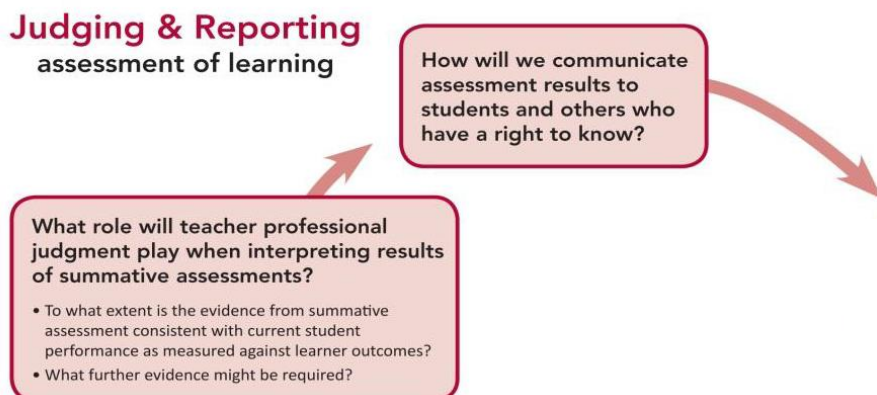
When assessment tasks are based on active student demonstrations of learning, teachers can provide feedback to students orally ‘on the spot’ and can also record their feedback electronically for use in planning for future learning and/or sharing assessment evidence with parents. It should be remembered that it is the student who is most in need of the feedback. Teacher comments that remain written in a teacher plan book or grade book will have little impact on student learning if the feedback is not shared with the student within a time frame where the student has the ability to improve his/her performance.

With support, students can also be sources of feedback for each other. When teachers assist students in developing a shared understanding of the assessment criteria and model how to use exemplars to gauge the level of performance relative to the criteria, students gain skill in providing feedback to their peers. A safe, supportive classroom environment is an essential prerequisite for effective peer feedback. As students develop trust, they are better able to give and receive feedback that will move learning forward.

How will teachers use evidence from formative assessment to inform instructional decisions?

Formative assessment should provide immediate, diagnostic information to the teacher. When teachers receive assessment evidence from students, they make decisions as to the next steps. If the teacher determines that the student has demonstrated success with the learning outcome, the student may move on to the next step in the instructional sequence or to a new concept. However, if the teacher determines that additional support is required, the teacher may draw upon other instructional activities, scaffolding support and further feedback to assist the student(s) in meeting the required level of skill or concept development. Thus instruction and assessment is designed on an ongoing basis to support student learning. Within early learning contexts, developmental differences in children will account for variations in the timing and support required for students to meet various learning targets.

Judging and Reporting: Assessment of Learning



What role will teacher professional judgment play when interpreting results of summative assessments?

Traditional grading practices and the division of the school year into reporting periods may be one reason for the preponderance of pencil/paper assessments. However, caution must be used when relying too heavily on these assessments as they are may not be representative of the full range of learner outcomes, particularly within early grades where much of the learning is performance based. If students seem to perform well during day-to-day classroom activities and do not perform well on a formal test, teachers should carefully examine the assessments to determine

- if the assessment is at the correct level of cognition, i.e., measuring the skill it is intended to measure based on the verb in the learning outcome; and/or
- if an alternate form of assessment may be more appropriate. Particularly in the content areas, understanding of the subject area concepts may be hindered by the requirement for the student to respond in writing. Oral assessment may be a better way to gather evidence of student understanding and performance.

Some may wonder if this is acceptable practice, but teachers can rest assured that the need to differentiate is not only desirable, but actually required within the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard. When assessment evidence is inconsistent, teachers should plan to collect further assessment evidence in order to determine the most consistent pattern of student performance, giving more consideration to the most recent evidence available.

Studies have shown that as soon as a 'grade' is attached to student work, the learning ceases. Therefore, a classroom assessment program, particularly within early learning environments should be heavily weighted towards formative assessment experiences with no grades attached in order to have the greatest impact on student learning.

How will we communicate assessment results to students and others who have a right to know?

As children develop at different rates, there is nothing to be gained by ranking and sorting young learners based on student performance at arbitrary reporting periods. As such, percentages and class averages are not necessary in early learning environments. Dylan Wiliam, a renowned advocate for formative assessment, has said the following.

As soon as students get a grade, the learning stops....If grades stop learning, students should be given them as infrequently as possible.... In middle school, there may be a case for grades once a year, but in elementary school, the use of grades appears to be entirely unjustified (2011, p. 123).

While teachers are required to follow the directives given by their school and jurisdiction leadership, they can seek opportunities for collegial conversations among educators that will move assessment and grading practices into patterns that are consistent with research and that are developmentally appropriate for young children. Teachers, as action researchers in their own classrooms, can gather rich evidence of student learning as they apply the principles of sound assessment practice and celebrate the success of their students. Video clips on the AAC website provide exemplars of teacher practice and student learning consistent with the principles described in this paper.

Concluding Thoughts

In speaking about the importance of assessment for learning, Dylan Wiliam has stated the following.

A focus on formative assessment does not just add on a few techniques here and there – it organizes the whole teaching and learning venture around learning, and supports teachers in organizing the learning experiences of their students more productively (2003, p. 56).

Nowhere is this focus more critical than in early learning environments. When young learners are nurtured along their way through effective classroom assessment practices, the stage is set for them to become confident, metacognitive learners. It's called assessment for *learning* and it's essential for success.

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- Bennett, S., & Mulgrew, A. (2012). *Creating credible criteria*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Assessment Consortium.
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- Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Web Links

Alberta Education Kindergarten Program Statement
<http://education.alberta.ca/media/312892/kindergarten.pdf>

Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard
<http://education.alberta.ca/media/6734948/teaching%20quality%20standard%20-%20english.pdf>

Alberta Teachers' Association Early Childhood Education Council
<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Specialist%20Councils/Council%20Directory/Pages/Early%20Childhood%20Education%20Council.aspx>