

Family Partnership in Early Childhood Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment is a process of arranging and evaluating information, which is gathered from different kinds of evidence about young children. The general purpose of assessment is evaluating infants and children to determine whether the development of the child is normal or needs assistance. Assessment is a comprehensive process of setting high expectations for student learning and provides discussion and feedback to improve student learning. Assessment of early childhood years needs more parents and family partnerships. In other words, family could be considered as one of the most important assessment supporters for educators. The purpose of this paper is to examine family-school partnerships in terms of assessment and evaluation.

Keywords: Assessment; parental involvement; early childhood education;

1. Introduction

Assessment of young children is different from assessment of older students because young children have different developmental changes, challenges, and abilities that affect the selection of assessment tools. There are significant differences in terms of assessment tools between early childhood grades and upper grades. Each stage has a different level of mental, social, and physical development and assessment strategies that are appropriate for young children's needs (Wortham, 2008). The definition of assessment is diverse because it includes all strategies that early childhood educators use to obtain information about a child's development and learning such as observation, documentation and other tools of assessment (Partnering with parents, 2002).

Cress (2004) reports that assessment of young children's learning, development and experiences are important for young children. However, the tools to assess these abilities should be developmentally, culturally, and technically acceptable and should provide beneficial information. Caris (2011) indicated that assessing young children is not just "testing" and assessment has to be considered as an exhaustive group of tools that reveal children's proficiencies, and a teaching plan to support child's weaknesses and family needs.

According to (Wortham, 2008) there are four main purpose of assessment in early childhood years as follows:

- Assessing to increase young children's level of learning.
- Determining children who need social services and early intervention.
- Observing process and assessing resources, programs, and trend.
- Assessing accomplishment of students, teachers and schools

The assessment in early childhood years should use information gathered from different sources in order to give comprehensive schema about children. For children, a couple of observations are more effective than single observations because young children could demonstrate learning in more than one way. Using a number of measures of learning provides more accurate assessment and decision about children (Wortham, 2008).

Literature review

1.1 Parental Involvement

Parents are first teacher of the child and they are responsible for all development of the child such as social, mental, physical, and emotional development. Children complete their development in a triangle of school, family, and community. However, school, community, and family have a significant responsibility to contribute formal education and educate young children (Kelley-Laine, 1998). There is a significant variation between past and today's school-family

relationships. Today's schools are more open to families and communities preferring to work together with them both in order to educate children effectively (Kelley-Laine, 1998).

Recently there has been growing interest in parental involvement. Establishing high levels of parental involvement in schools is necessarily component to provide the best possible education for young children (Holloway, Yamamoto, Suzuki, & Mindnich, 2008). One of the important requirements to provide best education for young children is building high levels of parental involvement (Hornby, 2000). It is important for parents, who have children in early childhood education to become aware about school functions, help children to be more productive and successful in the school, and arrange learning environment which support their learning at home (Holloway, at al., 2008).

The advantages of parental involvement do not just benefit the students. Research showed that school, parents, teachers, and communities benefit from the high level of parental involvement. Parents who are active in their child's education gain knowledge about school activities, child development, and assessment process and develop their self-efficacy and self-confidence (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). All parents are capable of contributing valuable information about their children because they know them very well and participated in all previous contacts with educators to assess and evaluate their child's education (Hornby, 2000). Teachers obtain information about each child individually and know their families, to meets their need individually and in an appropriate way. Parent interviews, panel discussions, or participation in home visits are most powerful ways to hear from parents directly (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004).

Children especially in early childhood years take parents as a model. Structure of the family's socio-economic and culture affects social experiences thereby emotional and social development of the child. School is a basic foundation in the process of socialization. The aim of this basic foundation is to provide children mental and social development, while teaching skills for the benefit of society and themselves. A partnership between the family and school system is inevitable in terms of child development. Through this collaboration the entire development could be supported. The collaboration with family is one of the most important factors that provide durability of learning in the school. (Yavuzer, 2002)

Ensari & Zembat (1999) state that parental involvement is a systematic approach to support and educate families to get them involved, also it is a kind of system that sharing information and setting up relationship. Parents believe they are supported when teachers listen to them, share information related children, and getting advises about childcare. It can be seen a large amount of research demonstrate that family is the key factor for academic achievement of the students.

Mindes (2007) defines a person who takes an active role in assessment as a player in the assessment process. She indicated that an early childhood assessment system includes crucial players such as children, family, administrators and the teacher. While the child takes the role of main character in assessment, the family is the second most important element because they have comprehensive knowledge, and information to contribute the assessment process. This information shows that family has a significant role in the assessment process.

There are many resources to gather information for assessment. One of the most important and primary sources of assessment is family and parents could be the most dependable source of information to obtain authentic description of their children's development because the home environment provides an opportunity for parents to observe children their natural environment (Crais, 2011). For example, parents have an opportunity to observe their children's language development when they speak with someone who lives in the same environment. Parents' contribution to the assessment process could make the evaluation more reliable and valid, because they are going to be aware of their child's strengths and weaknesses in the context of language development.

According to O'Neill's (2007) study one of the important tools that evaluate language development of children is a parent report. A parents' report is authentic and it has high reliability and validity, especially when assessment tools restricted in the school environment and parent report gives opportunity parent to observe their children in a large amount of situations. Parents have to undertake a significant role in their children's assessment process (Wortham, 2008). Although tests are important tools to measure children's learning and development, a parent's knowledge and experiences are foundations of accurate assessment for young children's development. Parents or other family members could identify their child's needs better than people who are not family members because they have comprehensive knowledge and information about their child's development (Xu & Filler, 2005).

Team up with family members is a necessity in order to do an effective and valid assessment. Partnership also provides positive sensitivity to understand children's development and knowledge. Families and other member of schools should be involved in assessing children's learning process (Scholastic Early Childhood Today, 2002). Swick, (2006) identified three factors that provide strong and sustain partnership between families and schools. First of all, the biggest factor that provides strong family-school partnership is welcoming families. Swick, (2006) argue that there are many

factors that reveal unwelcome environment in the school such as not inviting parents into the classroom, not respecting families who have different language, culture, or race and teacher do not care of their body language.

The second factor that provides a strong partnership for families and school is honoring families. Swick (2006) reported that there are not any people do not want to be honored. There are many ways to honor parents such as giving a certificate for their little contribution, validating all members who get involved in any activities, and treating all parents with respect. Finally, connecting with families is considered a key factor that provides partnership. Teachers should establish strong inter-connection with other important elements of the school to create a learning environment. Swick, (2006) recommended some ways to make a strong connection with family.

One of them is meeting with family members in their home demonstrates that teachers have a sense of responsibility. Also, gifting to them small things is important to establish a strong relationship. Listening to them carefully, being supportive, and making home visits enjoyable for family members, strengthens the relationship between families and schools. Another method to build connections between family and schools is setting up a conference. This is also an opportunity to know the family's needs, education levels, interests, and other some basic information about family. In addition, education activities for parents provide knowledge about parenting skills and teach them how to create a safe environment at home. Also the parents' education has significant role in establishing a strong family-school partnership. It can be seen that the basic principle to build a strong relationship between families and schools is finding an appropriate way or environment to start connection (Swick, 2006).

1.2 Why involve parents?

Parents want to encourage their children's learning process, work with schools and teachers collaboratively, and chose a perfect school for their children. Additionally, many countries create new policies to encourage family-school partnerships because a large amount of research indicated that higher student achievement is related to parental involvement. In France, Germany, and Denmark parental involvement is a right. Some countries consider parents as a consumer; they should have chance to chose their children's school. Considering parents as a consumer necessitate taking their desires into account by principals and other educators (Kelley-Laine, 1998).

According to Kelley-Laine (1998) the reasons why parent get involved are very diverse. First of all, parents want to increase their children's academic achievement in school setting. Secondly, they need education about parenting skills, school curriculum, and other issues that parents highly need. Third, parents want to gain information about their children and because of that they need to communicate with teachers and principals. Fourth, families want to affect the curriculum and convey their culture and values in the schools. Fifth, parents think that schools are for everyone and schools always need support. Sixth, sometimes families need individual support from the schools. Sometimes families want to overcome family crisis or may be interested in attending any workshop. These factors show that families have reasonable reasons to become part of the school.

Some parents consider parental involvement as an essential source for their children's achievement. According to Rogers, (1998) a sense of welcoming from educators is the most important reason for parents to get involved.

1.3 Family contribution in the assessment process

The family is a system that has profound knowledge about children's problems, qualifications, individual needs, skills, and concerns. This system gives the opportunity for family members to observe children's behavior in a long term. Their comprehensive and accurate knowledge about their children provide significant information for educators to assess children's development. The parents are the best estimator or assessor of their children's weaknesses and strengths (Mindes, 2007).

Brink (2002) indicated that parents could have some misunderstandings, concerns, or possible fear about the school, but when they get into comprehensive assessment process of their children their feelings about the school would change. Looking from the outside could not change people's ideas about something. For example, when I was a teacher, one of my student's fathers did not get into the school. Maybe he had some fears, bad experiences or concerns about the school. I had learned that he was an engineer, and knows how to play some musical instruments. I have invited him to the classroom to play musical instruments for the children. It was difficult to persuade him to participate in the school activity, but he finally agreed to come. His viewpoints were completely changed and he participated in all parental activities and assessment processes with his wife actively. Over time, he became one of the parents who encouraged other parents to get involved in school activities and the assessment process.

There is a breakpoint for everyone to overcome some problems or to change some old beliefs. The example shows that parents should be considered and assessed individually because they could have some different experiences, viewpoints, fears, and misunderstanding about the school. Also, this example demonstrates that parents are capable of contributing to their children's education and assessment process as long as the teacher discovers their skills.

There are some assessment tools for parents to contribute to the assessment process at home, which is appropriate for home and school setting. One of them is the child's accomplishment checklist. It is appropriate to measure children's language and communication skills and also for social, motor, and cognitive development. Additionally, play-based assessment is the other assessment tool that is appropriate for home and school. Play is one of the important activities that allow parents or teachers to observe children's behaviors and interactions with other people in their natural environment. In both free and structured play types play-based assessment could be used (Crais, 2011). According to Crais (2011) a play-play based assessment does not take much time and parents have a positive feeling about this test.

A routine-based assessment tool assess how often children participate in family activities. The aim of this assessment is to measure the level of child responsibility, freedom, and involvement to the activities and children's social, language, and play skills. Authentic assessment is the other assessment tool that allows parents to become part of the assessment process. It measures knowledge and ability of children in a natural setting (Crais, 2011).

Authentic assessment based on the information that gathered from persons who routinely have a relationship with the child. Additionally, to make the assessment more authentic, the information should be gained from the child's natural setting. Authentic assessment could be used to determine children who are at risk (Crais, 2011). An authentic assessment provides the opportunity for teachers to observe their children more profoundly during regular activities and learn how to individualize a teaching style for the children in the classroom (Jennifer, Rena, & Robyn, 2006).

Crais (2011) reported that the planning process that occurs before assessment and evaluation, which is called preassessment and preevaluation planning process. The main purpose of this type of assessment is setting up a meeting with professionals, the child, and family to gain comprehensive knowledge about the children, and making a plan for future evaluation. In these meetings professionals would determine the family and children's needs, strengths and weaknesses, and determine the responsibility of the family in the assessment process.

1.4 Teacher's Role in a School-Family Partnership

Teachers have a significant role to build a partnership communication between families and schools to understand the child's development and learning profoundly (Hornby, 2000). Teachers and administrators can improve their skills and knowledge by taking training for parental involvement. Having knowledge about different cultural frameworks affects communication positively (Wong & Hughes, 2006).

Graham-Clay (2005) argues that before the communication, there are three important steps that teachers have to consider. First, communication between teachers and parents starts with a welcome sign when parents first come to school. The second step is a smile, because meeting parents with a smile is influential. The third step is a clean school as this affects parents' thoughts about a school.

Teachers could establish strong relationships between home and school by providing information and resources to families. It is a significant responsibility for teachers to encourage parents to get involved in the process of assessment and evaluation actively (Brink, 2002). If teachers consider parents as the first educator of their children, they would be more active in terms of parental involvement. In other words, the viewpoint of teachers about parental involvement has significant effect on their implications for parents (Casper, 2003). This information shows that teachers and administrators have a significant role to get parents involved in education because they influence parents in many ways.

1.5 Teachers Need to Know

Basically, teachers have to know thoughts of parents about their children's improvement and education. However, it is important to have knowledge about family culture and customs that generate their understanding about the raising child (Mindes, 2007). Understanding diversity of families that include other family members is becoming an important aspect of education because the schools include families that come from different culture, language, race and ethnicity. Speaking different languages and having different viewpoints about raising child affect family-school partnerships (Wortham, 2008). According to Varela (2008) an important way to help those families and their children succeed is to first develop a group of teachers who understand the cultural diversity and are trained to face the challenges and rewards inherent in teaching

students who have a different culture, language, and ethnicity. A teachers training program is needed for the improvement of teachers' competence to contact with culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse parents (Denessen, Bakker, & Gierveld's, 2007).

Additionally, if children have special needs the teacher should have profound knowledge about the child. In these situations, the teachers need to work collaboratively with families to facilitate gaining knowledge from families because one of the basic requirements to create an individual educational plan for the student is the family-school partnership (Mindes, 2007). Beining (2011) reported that it is important to listen to parents interestedly and value their ideas and recommendations by including them in any decision-making.

1.6 *Building Trusting Relationship*

Teaching in early childhood education is not just working with child because teaching in this field necessitates working with both child and family (Beining, 2011). It is important to build a relationship that is based on mutual trust with families and early childhood teachers (Brink, 2002). Swick, (2006) has some suggestions for teachers to build a trusting atmosphere. First of all, the teacher has to show that he/she indeed loves all parents. Second, the teacher has to arrange a learning environment adequate for students and create welcoming place for families and children. Third, teachers have to assess themselves in terms of working with families. Additionally, they should try all possible ways to make all parents an active member in the learning process and facilitating a trusting relationship.

To build trust and strong relationships teachers should communicate with families often and incorporate them in the decision-making process. Teachers have to get training to gain knowledge about working with families. School principals are also responsible for being supportive with families in terms of creating different ways to get parents involved. Teachers and principals should be aware that building trust relationships could take time and they need to be patient (Patrikakou, 2005)

1.7 *Home visits*

Visits home at the very beginning of the term has a significant positive effect on the relationships with children and families (Wortham, 2008). A home visit is one of the indispensable elements of the learning experience, which helps teachers understand family and students profoundly. Home visits provide knowledge for teachers about how the home environment influences children's success in the school. Teacher could obtain information about the family and student background through home visits (Lim & Bates, 2010). Joshi, Eberly & Konzal (2005) indicated that if teachers do not have profound knowledge about their students' cultural structure, they would have struggled to establish a strong relationship between school and home.

Understanding the home culture of children allows teachers to improve the education of students who have a different culture and language. One of the most efficient ways to understand families' lives and students' educational developmental needs is home visit (Lim & Bates, 2010).

The research study of Lim & Bates (2010), which investigates teachers perceptions of home visits, indicated that many teachers want parents to involve in school activities and the parental involvement of current parents do not meet their expectations. In other words, they expect even more parents to get involved. Also to make more efficient home visits, the results of the study show that teachers need more training and knowledge about home visits. Additionally, the study suggests that teachers could have an opportunity to create groups to feel more comfortable and safe when they have home visits.

When I was a teacher, I made a few home visits at the beginning of year. It was very interesting and also educational for me to be knowledgeable about the child and family. I have realized that knowing family's lifestyles, culture, and family structure closely, affects the relationships with family members positively. It is also a motivation for me seeing a pleased family. However, home visits give significant opportunity to assess children's school and home life with children and family members. I have noticed that there is a considerable difference between students who receive home visitation and who does not in terms of behavior and academic success. Furthermore, based on my experiences that parents who receive home visits becomes more active in their child's education and assessment process. Although home visits have indisputable benefits for families, teachers and children, as a teacher I think home visits are not possible for all students.

Research studies demonstrate that home visit is one of the important ways to obtain accurate information about the children, family and home learning environment individually. It is also a significant opportunity for teachers to get

parents in assessment process and to administer the assessment process accurately.

1.8 Conferences

The other important role of teacher in education is parent conferences. Parent conferences provide opportunities for educators to establish strong relationships with the community (Elmore, 2008). Wortham (2008) explained many different types of parent conferences. First of all, the three-way conference that students, parents, and teachers attend. This is an opportunity for all of them to discuss some issues related to future goals, project and learning. They have an exchange of ideas on how to build relationships between school and home to overcome academic obstacles. The second type of conferences is student-led conferences. In these conferences, families and students discuss students' performance and families work as a partner. Also, the teacher attends conferences later to answer questions. The third type of conference are parent group meetings conferences in which teacher clarifies to all parents' the assessment process that is used. Basically, parents could obtain all information that they need about the assessment process tools such as individual student portfolios, report cards and other various forms. Additionally, parents could get answers to all their individual questions.

Elmore (2008) determined some steps to make conferences more productive for teachers and parents. The introduction should be relaxed and also include a first name introduction by the teacher to provide a relaxed atmosphere. The teacher who conducts the conference should consider the background and needs of families. Arranging a comfortable and welcoming environment for conferences makes parents more relaxed. The teacher should consider the diversity of different cultures, languages, and ethnicities when they prepare for conferences. For example, the conference provider could provide a translator for parents who have a different language. Teachers should be prepared for conferences in terms of content. These conferences should allow the parent and student's input to make the process more productive

1.9 Methods for obtaining information from families

Parents are the most important persons who could give a precious critical analysis about their children's performance during the assessment process (Brink, 2002). There are many ways for teachers, either formally or informally, to obtain information about the children and families. Parent interviews and parent questionnaires are some formal methods that are often used by teachers. However, casual conversations, phone calls, and other conversations are some informal ways to gain knowledge (Mindes, 2007).

1.9.1 Parent Questionnaires

There are many kinds of questionnaire instruments that are created to assess individuals. Questionnaires provide detailed information about the history of the family (Melchert & Kalemeera, 2009). Melchert & Kalemeera (2009) indicated that a "Family Background Questionnaire" is organized to obtain comprehensive information to assess family history accurately. The information obtained through a questionnaire includes child's health, development, personality trait, and family information. These parent questionnaires help teachers get knowledge about family perceptions on child development or education.

Parent questionnaire is the fundamental resource for young children because the parents are only source for children child behavior and other development. Parent questionnaires are beneficial for both parent and teachers because parents could provide brief picture of their child and express themselves. Teachers can obtain knowledge for their children and can then arrange an appropriate environment for students by taking into account the parent responses (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006).

Basically reviewing so many parent questionnaires online has taught me that parent questionnaires include detailed information about child identification, medical history, family history, natural father and mother history, child's developmental history which include social, emotional, physical, sexual, language and motor development, school history, and drug alcohol history. In terms of assessment process considering all information that is provided by parents through questionnaires is a significant source for teachers to assess children accurately.

The results of the analyses and discussions indicated that there existed some significant relationships between students' learning style preferences and such variables as fields of study, length of tertiary study, gender, age, learning language experience, and English proficiency level.

1.9.2 Parent interviews

Early childhood education teachers could gain comprehensive knowledge about children by parent interview (Brink, 2002). During interviews, teachers ask questions about children's habits, what is and is not going well, behaviors, or some specific questions that assist the teacher to understand the children better (Cress, 2004). Interviews could be formal and informal (Xu & Filler, 2005). Parent interview provide information that related concerns and child's behavioral problems (Rogers, 1998).

Mindes (2007) argue that starting the interview by asking parents for their personal thoughts about their children is the best way to begin. The teachers' role during the interview is also important because the productivity of the interviewee sometimes depends to the interviewer listening skills. Ending the interview with a summary of the information that was obtained makes the interview more clear and comprehensible.

Recommendations

Based on my research the best recommendations are that teachers have to be aware of the importance of family-school partnerships during the assessment process because being aware of their responsibility is in fact a key factor for school-family partnerships. Also, parental involvement should be considered as a foundation of family-school partnership during the assessment process. Relationships with families should be strong and trusting for consistency. Principals, teachers, families, and community should work collaboratively for a productive assessment process. Multiple assessment methods should be used such as classroom observations, multiple and single domain tools, parent questionnaires, and parent interview.

Teachers should create comfortable and welcoming environments in the school for families and should also make home visits to assess children's home learning environment. They should also provide resources for linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse families. Providing a translator for parents who have another language as their dominant language, teachers and school administrators should consider the level of parents' English proficiency when they are speaking with parents whose native language is other than English.

Determining of what methods of communication work best for parents and what language is best to use for oral and written communication throughout the school year. Teachers should have knowledge about cultural differences in nonverbal communications Teachers should be knowledgeable about other's cultures, lifestyles, and values for effective relationships with people who come from different cultures. Educators and principals should determine barriers that prevent parental involvement and should know how to overcome these barriers in terms of assessment.

Conclusions

The broad definition of assessment is evaluating infants and children to determine whether the development of the child is normal or needs some support. The assessment in early childhood education uses information that was gathered from different resources to give a comprehensive idea about the children. The positive influence of parental involvement has been investigated by a large amount of research. Although, getting families involved in the education process is difficult, the significant results of their involvement in the child's education should not be overlooked. Parental involvement should be considered as a foundation of the school-family partnerships assessment system. A strong family-school relationship reveals an accurate assessment process for young children.

The development and use of different types of assessment in the early childhood years could be difficult for teachers because of the nature and rapid changes in terms of the development of young children; it is difficult to create tests that accurately measure personal knowledge and information for young children. In this sense, getting families involved in the process of assessment and evaluation is more important in the early childhood assessment system.

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