Director’s Corner: Assessment

The NAEYC standard for Assessment advocates ongoing authentic observations and evaluations of a child’s learning and development, as well as communicating the child's progress to the family. As with the curriculum standard, there is no requirement that we utilize a particular type of assessment or standardized test, so we are free to design a system that fits our developmental goals and our thematic approach to curriculum. We ARE required to demonstrate, through our overall program portfolio and our individual classroom portfolios, that our assessment system is an organized and integral part of our program and document that it meets the accepted reliability and validity criteria for early childhood assessments.

Interestingly, assessment is the one standard in the whole NAEYC system for which our affiliation with Carnegie Mellon University has little direct benefit. In fact, NONE of the data collected by researchers conducting studies in our laboratory school can be shared with school personnel in a way that would identify individual children, both for confidentiality reasons and because many of the measures used in the studies are only in the development stage and might, therefore, not be valid or reliable assessments.

• The Children’s School focuses assessment on describing the developmental progress of individual children so that we can best adapt our program to capitalize on the strengths and interests of our unique groups each year and help our wide range of children progress. Occasionally, we identify areas of weakness that might require referrals for diagnostic testing to determine whether the child would benefit from therapeutic intervention. Most often, such intervention would involve speech / language therapy, occupational therapy, etc., that is either done in the context of school or on an outpatient basis elsewhere.

• To gather our assessment data, we utilize a variety of natural classroom activities that are both interesting and familiar to the children, often in the context of a routine or game. For example, observations of children sharing at circle time provides teachers with information about their verbal communication skills, their ability to interact with peers who ask questions or offer ideas, etc. During a game of bingo in which one child is the “caller” during each round, the teacher can assess the caller’s comfort in a leadership role, knowledge of the numbers or letters on the cards, and ability to coach other children who may not see the called item on their cards. To assess many gross motor skills at one time, a teacher might arrange an obstacle course that involves climbing up and down steps, crawling through a tunnel, hopping from one hoop to another, walking across a balance beam, and so on. Because the tasks are familiar and easily adaptable, they can be used effectively with children who are dual language learners, as well as those who have special needs.

• We discuss assessment information with families most formally during parent / teacher conferences when we review each developmental domain and describe our observations, along with sharing photos and children’s creations. We always informally welcome parent input regarding their view of the child’s strengths and weaknesses, but we formalized that process this year by using the Ages & Stages questionnaires. With this more reciprocal approach to evaluating children’s progress, we are better able to partner in planning next steps for home and school emphasis designed to challenge the strong areas and alleviate the difficulties.

• Overall, our approach to assessment resonates well with Carnegie Mellon’s emphasis on continuous quality improvement in the context of commitment to collaborative and reflective efforts that result in teaching and learning excellence.