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# Effective Assessment

in the Early Years Foundation Stage

Jan Dubiel

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# Effective Assessment

in the Early Years Foundation Stage

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It continues to be a great privilege to work alongside Jan Dubiel in his role as National Development Manager and to be jointly publishing the latest edition of his book.

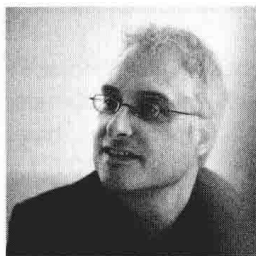
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## About the Author



Jan Dubiel is the National Development Manager at Early Excellence and works as part of the team to support early years practitioners and settings in all aspects of practice and provision. Having trained as an Early Years specialist, Jan worked as a Nursery, Reception and Year 1 teacher in schools across the country, leading teams as an Early Years co-ordinator. Following roles as an Early Years consultant and senior adviser, he was appointed by the then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to lead on the management of the (Early Years) Foundation Stage Profile, and had national responsibility for its implementation and moderation, developing guidance and support materials and working at a strategic level with policy makers.

Jan has developed a national and international reputation as a conference speaker, consultant and trainer, and has written widely on different aspects of Early Years pedagogy. His first book, *Effective Assessment in the EYFS*, was published by SAGE in 2014.

# Acknowledgements

It is a well-worn, yet accurate maxim that whenever we explore ideas we inevitably find ourselves standing on the shoulders of giants. The Early Years community has its own colossi who have pushed and are still pushing the boundaries of knowledge and perception in order to understand and effectively provide for the development of young children. We are all indebted to their courage and wisdom in creating a vision of what is possible, and their determination to transcend hostilities, misconceptions and obstacles in order to establish both a truth and a reality about the importance, purpose and nature of early years pedagogy. I hope that their words and ideas have been accurately referenced and acknowledged with appropriate reverence in this book.

Needless to say, I will always be indebted to the many children I have worked with over the years as a practitioner and the honest and direct way they enabled me to understand how theories and ideas appear and develop in practice, and grateful for the way in which they unknowingly immersed me in the unpredictability and exhilaration of watching and supporting children's development.

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Jane Golightly was the Early Years Adviser for York, and demonstrated her faith in my unproven ability by appointing me as a consultant and taught me through example how to work with the challenges and possibilities of strategic management; when in that role myself I would often secretly ask myself 'what would Jane do in this situation?'. The innovative 'Shared Foundation' that was established at the time had a strong influence on my thinking and understanding about the importance of continuity and the role that effective assessment plays in ensuring that the needs of 'unique learners' are met.

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Over the past years, Early Excellence has become both a national reference point for the development of effective Early Years practice and a source of principled vision for the Early Years community. It is no accident that the aforementioned colossi all have an ongoing relationship with the organisation as trainers and conference speakers. I would additionally like to take this opportunity to personally thank Liz Marsden, the founder and director, for her support while writing this book.

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Jo Hager, Windhill Primary School, Doncaster

All the EYFS staff at Lark Hill Community Primary School, Salford

# Companion Website

This new edition of *Effective Assessment in the Early Years* is supported by a wealth of online resources which you can access at

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**Follow** web links which direct you to useful websites to further your study and support you in practice.

**Check out** further readings to expand your knowledge.

**Watch** observation and assessment videos with commentary from Jan Dubiel.

**Explore** more examples of completed child assessments.

# Useful Websites

- The Association for Achievement and Improvement through assessment is a good way to keep up to date with assessment matters across all ages:  
<http://www.aaia.org.uk/category/aol/statutory/>
- National curriculum and assessment guidance for Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England  
Scotland – <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/earlylearningandchildcare/curriculum/supportingearlylevel/implementation/assessment.asp>  
Northern Ireland – [http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/foundation\\_stage/assessment/index.asp](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/foundation_stage/assessment/index.asp)  
Wales – <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/earlyyearshome/?lang=en>  
England – <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/2016-early-years-foundation-stage-assessment-and-reporting-arrangements-ara>
- UK Government information on the Baselines Assessment  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reception-baseline-assessment-guide-to-signing-up-your-school>
- Approved providers of the Baseline Assessment  
Early Excellence – <http://earlyexcellence.com/>  
Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University (CEM) – <http://www.cem.org/>  
National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) – <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/>
- Early Years Foundation stage Profile: 2016 handbook  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-handbook>
- Transcript of a Speech entitled 'Unseen Children' delivered by Sir Michael Wilshaw, 20th June, 2013  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/unseen-children>

- The EYFS progress check at age two. A Know How Guide  
<http://www.ncb.org.uk/areas-of-activity/early-childhood/resources/publications/progress-check-at-two>
- Integrated review at age 2: Implementation study  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-at-age-2-implementation-study>

# Contents

<i>About the Author</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Companion Website</i>	x
<i>Useful Websites</i>	xi
1 Introduction – Reclaiming Assessment	1
2 Why is Assessment Important?	15
3 What are the Purposes of Assessment?	29
4 Significances and Signifiers of Child Development	43
5 The Intuitive Professional	59
6 Establishing Eight Principles for Effective Early Years Assessment	74
7 Assessment in Practice	81
8 Assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage	106
9 The 2-Year-Old Progress Check and the Integrated Review	121
10 The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile	137
11 The Baseline Assessment 2015 Onwards	165
<i>Bibliography</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	184

# 1

## Introduction – Reclaiming Assessment

This chapter will:

- Explore the nature and existing definitions of the term ‘assessment’
- Identify and challenge mythologies associated with assessment
- Establish a balanced and accurate definition of assessment in Early Years pedagogical theory and practice
- Explore the notion of ‘significance’ and ‘signifiers’ in children’s learning and development
- Clarify key terminology

When we work with children we connect ourselves to the future – through the inspiration, guidance and wisdom that we provide, and through the influence and impact we have on children’s lives, their understanding and their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Although this is a future that we may not necessarily see, it is one that we help to shape and one that we are ultimately responsible for (Postman 1982). After all, today’s children are tomorrow’s citizens, its leaders, thinkers, policy makers, innovators and entrepreneurs (Katz 2008). The world we will live in many years from now will be the one governed, organised and enriched by the children we have worked with.

This impact, and by association its responsibility, is even more significant when working with children aged birth to 5. Studies such as the Wikart/Perry Preschool study (Schweinhart et al. 2005) and the ongoing Effective Pre-School and Primary Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al. 2010) demonstrate the critical influence that pre-school provision can have on outcomes and life chances for children well into their adulthood. Equally significant is the growing evidence (Sylva et al. 2010) that the *quality* of such provision is one of



the most powerful and influential variables, and that the outcomes for children – in all aspects of life – can be strongly determined by this. When this is coupled with neurological evidence that identifies this age range as the most significant in the growth and development of the brain (Shore 1997; Whitebread 2012) then the responsibility becomes an even more stark and weighty one. By the time children start formal schooling much of their sense of themselves is already formed, their understanding of the world around them starting to take definite shape. Neurologically, it is believed that up to 85% of their lifetime dendrital and synaptic connections – the physical basis on which learning is created – have already taken place. Far from the traditionalist view that school is the point at which learning starts, what happens then builds directly on what has already taken place (Shore 1997).

The role of the practitioner in every Early Years setting is by its nature a multi-faceted one (Rose and Rogers 2012). Multiple decisions are taken on a second-by-second basis to ensure that the most effective and life-enriching opportunities are available to children and that their learning and development continues to be supported, facilitated and extended. Conscious as practitioners are of the dramatic responsibility they bear, there is a continual awareness of the need to optimise each moment to most effectively enable and empower children as thinkers and learners. Learning is a constant process; neurological connections are continually being formed, adopted, reconfigured and pruned; the brain continually reshapes and 'sculpts' its knowledge, understanding and 'cognitive flexibility'. The practitioner's role is to shape and guide this learning so that it is useful, meaningful and applicable to the lives of the children they work with, knowing that birth to 5, the period covered by the terminology of 'Early Years', is the most rapidly intense and important period of growth.

Working mostly through their 'informed intuition', their experiences, wealth of expertise, knowledge and their highly refined, complex skills in translating and converting these into action, practitioners continually adapt their responses, ask questions, make assertions and provide challenge and support to the children they work with. This is how the fragmented tesserae of each interaction, each conversation, each suggestion, provocation and moment of direct teaching culminate in the skilful, well-equipped, inquisitive, confident and creative children that we, as practitioners, proudly usher into the next phase of their learning.

A key aspect of this process and a critical facet of the practitioner's role is that of assessment.

The purpose of this book is to focus specifically on this aspect by defining and exploring the critical role and purpose of assessment in effective Early Years pedagogy, examining the considerations and challenges that practitioners face in their day-to-day practice. It will combine an analysis of the

theoretical and philosophical aspects required to understand it with a practical overview of how this might translate itself into considerations for everyday practice. Finally, it will link directly to the current statutory assessment requirements through the English Early Years Foundation Stage framework and the specifics of the 'Two Year Old Progress Check', the EYFS Profile and the 'Baseline Assessment'

This book has been written for practitioners, headteachers, managers, trainers, policy makers and all those with an interest in ensuring that the experiences and opportunities that children have in the Early Years are the most meaningful and effective that they can be. Throughout the book I use the term 'successful' as the key aspiration and outcome for children. It is important to note that this refers to a broad definition of success that may include, but is not exclusively, what might be defined as 'academic'. Success in the sense that I use it refers to a broad and deep skill and knowledge set that could be referred to as 'life skills', and which incorporates aspects of cognitive, creative, emotional, social and personal as well as purely academic notions of success.

## **Mythologies and misunderstandings**

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Of all the areas of Early Years practice, it appears that it is the approach to and understanding of assessment that remains the most confused, maligned, misunderstood and misused (Tickell 2011). It is subject to the most extreme and resilient mythology – however ludicrous – and still often appears to operate on the basis of a 'folklore' model (Carr 2001) that serves the purpose of expedience and convenience rather than increasing our information base of how children demonstrate their significant knowledge and understanding. This tension is a critical one to resolve, as an effective and sensible approach to assessment is fundamental to meaningful and inclusive practice. It is also crucial to be aware of, and challenge head on, the dangers of over-complicating what is a critical yet intuitive (and sometimes counter-intuitive/'informed' intuition) aspect of successful and effective Early Years pedagogy and practice.

So the title of this chapter – 'Reclaiming Assessment' – is a deliberately and consciously provocative one, as it seeks to redefine and reconceptualise what the term means and how we perceive it, and this is ultimately what will impact most strongly on practice and provision in Early Years settings. Above all, effective assessment operates as the most potent lever for self-reflection, change and the development of practice (Carr 2001). The understanding of assessment, its perception, and even the use of the word itself are subject to such wilful misunderstanding and misuse that practitioners can be forgiven

for succumbing to its all-pervasive negativity and expanse of nefarious, unwieldy and unnecessary baggage.

The following examples are all taken directly from my own experiences as a Local Authority Consultant and Adviser.

### Case study 1



A well-resourced Travel Agents Role Play has been set up in the classroom following a visit to a local branch with the theme 'Journeys'. The children use the area very effectively, taking on the roles of Travel Agent and customer with enthusiasm and authenticity. One child ushers a potential client into the office to discuss the kind of holiday that they would like. 'Where would you like to visit?' she asks, 'How would you like to travel there?', 'What food would you like to eat when you are there?' and so on. On a clipboard she begins to record this information, spelling common words accurately and making phonetically plausible attempts at others such as 'afrika' and 'chps'. She is very skilled at the role, very involved in the activity, and keen to complete the transaction. In the middle of this, the teacher calls her over to the table where she is 'assessing phonic knowledge'. The child is faced with a drawn picture of an apple tree containing a number of apples. Each apple has a single letter on. The teacher points to each of these and asks her what sound the letter makes. The child, anxious that the customer does not leave, completes this assessment activity as quickly as possible, continually turning round to make sure that the customer remains. When she is finally released to return she has only identified three of the letter sounds correctly.

### Case study 2



Whilst we are discussing the development of children in the setting, the practitioner wearily reaches up to a shelf and takes down a large and generously stuffed A3 folder from a number of similar ones alongside it. Inside, a detailed 'Learning Portfolio' itemises the child's achievements through a plethora of notes and photographs. Much of the information is similar and simple – 'Charlie made a tower out of bricks', 'Charlie completed a jigsaw', 'Charlie likes being outside' and so on. During the ensuing discussion the practitioner states that she spends much of her evenings updating the Portfolio for each child with information and photographs from the day. She declares it to be the most time-consuming task, and whenever anything happens in the setting her first thought is 'how can I record that for the Portfolio?' When I ask her what happens to all this carefully stored information, she replies that sometimes parents might take it home at the end of the year, but she never looks at the Portfolio once the information has been added. 'Does the next practitioner or setting look at it?' I ask, and she laughs – 'No, they wouldn't have time to wade through all this information for every single child'.