Reflective Narrative SLO II: Child and Environmental Assessment and Study

*Students will demonstrate knowledge of assessment issues and perform qualitative and quantitative assessments of children and their environments.*

Assessment is an intricate word that frequently is misconstrued. In contrast to research, the primary goal of assessment is to improve practice. Conducting assessments and then interpreting the results can often be intimidating for those who are unfamiliar with the practice. However, as a college-educated adult with a background in Child Development, rather than getting a daunting feeling when I hear the word “assessment” I become excited and curious. I can attribute my feelings towards assessment to my higher education Child Development courses, which have taught me to make informed decisions to improve children’s learning processes and the quality of the environment based on observations and assessment.

Prior to taking courses which aided in my understanding of assessment, I would not be able to tell you the difference between assessment and research. I thought these two areas were one in the same. Though similar mostly in their methods of data collection, it is the way in which you act upon the results which distinguishes one from the other. Both involve asking a question, and through a step-by-step process, a conclusion can be drawn that will help to answer the question. In the past, I did not comprehend the extensiveness of research, when compared to assessment. I now am able to recognize that research takes assessment one step further because it seeks to provide evidence for an overarching concept or theory that can be broadly applied, as well as other purposes, such as replication of previous findings. My understanding of assessment has grown as a result of not only class discussions and lectures at the University, but also as a result of my personal observations and hands-on experiences. I now recognize the importance of assessment in program development and also in meeting a child’s needs.

As previously mentioned, assessment is often misconstrued with research. Research is a systematic process, which includes gathering data and after analyzing the data, determining results and providing empirical support or not for either accepting or rejecting hypotheses. Though assessment is a type of action research, it is more closely designed to improve practice rather than to generate theoretical knowledge. While research is intended to investigate and provide evidence regarding a hypothesis or theory and can be applied broadly to all audiences, assessment aims to help professionals make better decisions for their students. Most importantly, assessments do not generalize to all students, instead they are designed to recognize children’s individual needs so that these areas of improvement can be targeted and enhanced.

Two specific experiences that have facilitated the growth in my knowledge of assessment come from first, an Observation Techniques course, and second, a Child Development Practicum course. The Observation Techniques course allowed for me to apply my knowledge of children’s physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development and make observations based on these developmental domains. Additionally, my understanding of assessment was enhanced as a result of the direct fieldwork I conducted in the Child Development Practicum course. This course allowed for me to plan and implement a developmentally effective program for toddlers. I was able to assess the children’s developmental progress, in addition to evaluating my own teaching effectiveness. Additionally, I am taking a course titled Issues in Assessment for Children and Families. This course is providing me with not only an overview of child and family assessment, but also is allowing me to apply the knowledge gained from the class to an Environmental Assessment Report of a child care setting.

The single most important thing I have learned about assessment is that it cannot be generalized for children. Instead, it must be tailored to specific individuals. It is important to understand this because each child is unique in his/her understanding of subjects, so by using an assessment that generalizes the population, it is not serving a beneficial purpose. Each child learns at his or her own rate, so it is not appropriate to set a standard that every child must adhere to. I do agree that by having a baseline of expectations that need to be met, one is able to assess what a particular child is capable of doing, but it is crucial to remember that one cannot determine a child’s success from the criteria of a general population, because every child has a different rate at which he or she acquires new information and learns.

Personally, I have struggled to understand how an assessment such as the SAT, formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test but now is just an acronym, can be used to measure “developed reasoning”. I do not agree that a test such as the SAT is used appropriately because it is not an accurate predictor of how well a student will do at the collegiate level. There are many facets that need to be considered when using an assessment test like the SAT to determine an individual’s level of competence and success at a higher level institution. For example, how is a generalized test able to predict an individual’s success rate when those taking the test come from different socio-economic backgrounds? Or who are taught by teachers who have different levels of investment in their students? Or who are educated from states that have different standards? Lastly, each individual taking the test will have different levels of investment in the exam, so the results will not accurately illustrate tasks the individual is capable of completing.

The culminating project for my Child Development Practicum course was the completion of a Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) on one child. This assignment documents my ability in the area of Child and Environment Assessment because it entailed making observations on a child and taking those authentic observations to determine the child’s abilities in a multitude of domains such as: social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development. After making observations, I used the observations to document and evaluate the child’s level of competence in these areas. Additionally, I worked collaboratively to reflect and make modifications based upon shared feedback to enhance the DRDP, which aligns with the definition of assessment.

Though the Observation Techniques course, I acquired and applied basic observation skills regarding the domains of development: cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical. The final product was a portfolio, which included different means of assessment tools, such as checklists, socio-grams, and communication tables. These different documents allowed for me to document the child’s areas of expertise and also the areas of improvement.