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Using Portfolios to Assess and Nurture Early Literacy from a Developmental Perspective

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PORTFOLIOS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN SHOULD BE A POWERFUL INSTRUMENT for assessing and nurturing early literacy development for both the child and the teacher. However, if a teacher does not understand the developmental process of children's early literacy, the instrument remains monodimensional and flat, rather than interactive and dynamic (Stone 1995).

When something is *interactive*, there is a link between key elements so each affects the other; when it is *dynamic*, it possesses a power or force that produces change. Within an early literacy portfolio, the elements of interaction for the teacher and child are the knowledge of early literacy development, the evaluation of the development through reflection, and the child's early literacy development as documented in the portfolio. To be dynamic, the interaction between these key elements should produce change—for both the child and the teacher. For the child, the portfolio is a tool that encourages her to reflect on her current stage of development in light of her previous stage of development and to begin the process of moving to the next stage. She first becomes aware of and then actively engages in her own learning. She continually changes in her understanding of her own literacy development and begins setting goals. The teacher also uses the portfolio as a tool to reflect on the child's current and past stages of development and to inform her practice, making changes in her

instructional strategies in order to help nurture the child's development to the next stage. As Gomez notes, "portfolios give teachers a rich opportunity to reconsider their teaching practice by making tight connections between instruction and assessment (Gomez 1991, 627–28).

In order for a teacher to harness the power of an early literacy portfolio, she must have a solid understanding of early literacy development. Only then can the portfolio become an interactive and dynamic tool which can promote a child's literacy growth. Thus, the knowledge of early literacy development becomes the context for documenting, interpreting and nurturing a child's literacy development within the portfolio framework. Without this context, an early literacy portfolio may succumb to simply being a collection of children's work. The following discussion provides one way of understanding early literacy development context for situating portfolios.

The Developmental Process of Literacy—The Foundation of an Effective Early Literacy Portfolio

New Zealand's Marie Clay first used the term "emergent literacy" to describe the development of young children's literacy (Clay 1966). Based on her research, Clay demonstrates that literacy is a developmental process with the child being an active participant in his or her own literacy development (Clay 1966, 1972, and 1975). Goodman suggests that children "discover and invent literacy as they actively participate in a literate society" (Goodman 1984, 102). If teachers are aware of the process, the discovery, and the invention, they are empowered to document this development in a portfolio and support literacy development through appropriate instructional strategies.

If teachers are unaware of the processes of emerging literacy for young children, they place themselves in the unwitting position of not being able to recognize a child's emerging literacy and, thus, cannot effectively celebrate, value, protect, and nurture the process. In order for the portfolio to be effective, the teacher must know where the child is in his or her developmental process within the context of known literacy developmental patterns and as documented by the child's work in the portfolio. Knowledge of early literacy development informs the teacher of what to look for in each child's development. Only then is the teacher able to assess and interpret the child's current literacy. This knowledge helps the teacher support the child's next developmental step through appropriate instructional

strategies. Knowledge of literacy development and its process is thus the foundational piece of early literacy portfolio assessment. This knowledge will help teachers effectively use portfolios to 1) document student progress and growth; 2) support and guide instruction; and 3) communicate each student's successful growth to both the child and parent. For young children this type of formative portfolio assessment, which helps children develop, will be most beneficial.

The Process of Early Literacy Development

Early literacy portfolio data collection, evaluation, and interpretation must reflect knowledge of the process of early literacy development. For example, in the process of written language development, the young child enters the writing process as an inventor, first drawing, then scribbling or making letter-like graphemes. Figure 1 illustrates the context of known early literacy developmental patterns based on research of young children's writing (Sulzby 1988; Gentry 1981; Sulzby et al. 1988; Clay 1975).

The child, in this developmental process, writes strings of random letters, moves next to writing random and initial consonants, and then begins using letters for initial and final consonants. Next, vowels appear in her writing. Finally, the child is able to write multiple related sentences and many words with correct spelling.
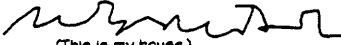
When conferencing with a young child on a writing piece for her portfolio, the teacher may use the Stages of Writing Development chart (figure 1) as well as the Writing Development Checklist (figure 2). Both guide the teacher in discerning and then interpreting the developmental nature of the child's writing. Knowledge of this context is crucial to using the portfolio as a tool in supporting early literacy development.

However, this knowledge must also be embedded in the attributes of the process of this development, which will significantly impact portfolio data collection and evaluation. The process of early literacy development takes time, of course, and should be placed within a meaningfully and functionally literate environment for the child.

In the process of learning to write, the teacher gives the child time to develop. For example, Krista conferenced with her teacher about her daily writing journal. Krista, age five, wrote *Dwxps*. Orally, she read, "I have a funny cat." The teacher asked Krista, "Are you using letters? Do you have a capital at the beginning? Do you have a period at the end?" Krista smiled and answered, "Yes" to each question as she evaluated her own work. The

Figure 1

STAGES OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT CHART

1. (This is my house.)		Pictures
2. (This is my house.)		Scribble (Approximation)
3. A cMAO WA (This is my house.)		Random Letters
4. I VA DAAO (I have a dog.)		Random and Initial
5. I L MB (I like my bike.)		Initial Consonants
6. I lk mi Bk. (I like my bike.)		Initial and Final Sounds
7. I lik to pla with my cat. (I like to play with my cat.)		Vowel Sounds Appear
8. My fav orit dinosor is the stegosorus. (My favorite dinosaur is the stegosaurus.)		All Syllables Represented
9. Today I am going to the stor with my mothr. I am going to by a present for my brothrs brthday. He is thre yers old.		Multiple, Related Sentences and Many Words with Correct Spelling

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teacher realized from her knowledge of literacy development that Krista was in the random letters (letters not associated with sounds) stage, so she helped Krista listen for consonants in the sentence she was orally communicating, nurturing her to the next stage of development. The next day Krista wrote a similar piece using random letters. In fact, she wrote using random letters for several months before she moved to the next stage of using random and initial consonants. Every day the teacher conferenced with Krista, nurturing her to the next stage of development by helping her hear the consonants

Figure 2

WRITING DEVELOPMENT CHECKLIST

Name _____ Date _____

	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
STAGE ONE									
Pre-letter writing/pictures									
Approximation (scribble)									
Random use of letters									
Uses random and initial letters									
Random use of sight words									
Copies letters/words									
STAGE TWO									
Transfers thoughts to paper									
Uses initial consonants									
Uses initial and ending consonants									
Uses sight words									
Begins to form letters correctly									
Reads back accurately at conference									
Writes from left to right									
STAGE THREE									
Writes a complete sentence									
Beginning to use periods									
Leaves space									
Beginning to use vowels									
Beginning to use capital & lower case letters									
Beginning to represent all syllables									
STAGE FOUR									
Writes multiple sentences									
Uses vowels									
Represents all syllables									
More correct spellings than word approximations									
Sequences ideas									
Uses periods									
STAGE FIVE									
Can carry a story									
Uses punctuation (periods, commas, question marks, exclamation marks, quotation marks)									
Edits own writing (i.e., spelling, content)									
Uses a variety of genres (factual, imaginative, poetry, personal narrative, etc.)									
Organizes writing webs									
Writes with paragraphs									

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in her oral language. The teacher used the Stages of Writing Development and the Writing Development Checklist to guide her in conferencing with Krista. The teacher and Krista chose samples of both stages of development from Krista's daily writing journal to include in Krista's portfolio in order to document her writing progress. The teacher also included the personal anecdotal records she recorded daily regarding her observations of Krista's writing and the conferencing strategies she used with Krista.

It is important to note that if the teacher were not aware that it takes time for a child to develop to the next stage, she may have pushed Krista beyond her understanding and personal construction of how writing goes. Understanding that children take time to develop written literacy is an important component of conferencing with young children.

Early literacy development is also embodied in a positive attitude, with the teacher excited about each emerging step a child takes. During every portfolio conference, the teacher praises Krista for writing with letters, using a capital and a period, and her efforts to listen for the sounds in her oral language and match the sounds to letters. Each of Krista's stages of emergent literacy is celebrated. Together, they place selections of her writing in her portfolio with each stage recognized as having value and importance, reflecting Krista's personal construction of the writing process.
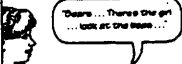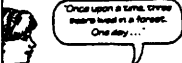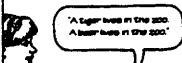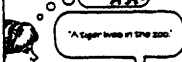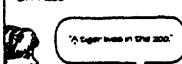
Another attribute of the process is providing a meaningful and functional writing environment. Understanding this aspect directs the teacher to provide meaningful and functional writing experiences for the children. For example, Krista wrote about her world in her journal, she wrote notes to friends at the Mail Box center, and she wrote books at the Writing Center. Because Krista wrote for real reasons, her writings meant more and eventually found their way into her portfolio.

A literacy portfolio also reflects the teacher's understanding of the stages of reading development. Reading is defined as the "*process* of deriving meaning from the printed 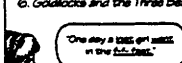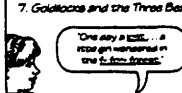page or written words" (Wolfgang and Sanders 1981, 116).The concept of emergent literacy suggests that a child does not learn to read suddenly, but that becoming literate is a process that begins at birth. Sulzby, in studying the emergent reading behaviors of children ages two to six, classified steps to the process of becoming a reader (Sulzby, 1986). Her developmental schema included 1) attending to pictures but not forming stories; 2) attending to pictures and forming oral stories; 3) attending to a mix of pictures, reading and storytelling; 4) attending to pictures but forming written stories; and 5) attending to print. When conferencing with a young child on reading for her literacy portfolio, the teacher uses the Stages of Reading Development chart (figure 3) as well as the Reading Development Checklist (figure 4). Again, both guide the teacher in looking at the developmental nature of the child's reading.

The underlying point in learning to read, as in learning to write, is that it is a process which takes time. For example, one day Gabriela asked her teacher if she could read her a picture book which had several paragraphs on each page. Telling the story through the pictures, Gabriela sounded as if she

Figure 3

STAGES OF READING
DEVELOPMENT

1. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* "Bears ... There's the girl ... look at the ..."	Attends to pictures: Does not tell story. (Labels or comments on pictures)
2. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* "Once upon a time, three bears lived in a forest. One day ..."	Attends to pictures: Tells story. (Sounds like child is reading the story)
3. A Zoo "A tiger lives in the zoo." "A bear lives in the zoo."	Attends to pictures. Memorizes simple patterned text. Knows print contains meaning. (May finger point matching words to memorized text, but no reading)
4. A Zoo "A tiger lives in the zoo."	Attends to pictures and some text. (Uses picture clues, memorized text, beginning sounds and sight words to access "story")
5. A Zoo "A tiger lives in the zoo."	Reads simple, patterned text. (Relies on picture clues, familiar story, beginning sounds, and sight words to access "text")
6. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* "One day a little girl went in the full bear."	Reads text with inconsistent strategy use (meaning, syntax, phonics).
7. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* "One day a little ... a little girl wandered in the ... forest."	Reads text independently. Uses all strategies effectively (meaning, syntax, phonics). Self-corrects.

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were actually reading the book. The teacher, recognizing this developmental stage of reading (attends to pictures; tells a story), recorded Gabriela's stage of reading development in her anecdotal records. The anecdotal records along with Gabriela's Reading Log were added to her literacy portfolio. During small group reading, the teacher built on Gabriela's stage of development by using strategies that helped her begin moving to the next stage of attending to print, a move that took Gabriela almost four months.

Figure 4

READING DEVELOPMENT CHECKLIST

Name _____ Date _____

STAGE ONE	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
Front/back of book									
Top/bottom of page									
Attends to pictures: Labels/comments									
Attends to pictures: Tells story									
Print contains meaning									
Differentiates letters/words									
Concept of word/space									
Identifies some environmental print									
One-to-one matching (voice to print)									
Knows where to begin									
Left-to-right/Return sweep									
Memorizes text									
STAGE TWO	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
Attends to some print									
Identifies some letters									
Identifies sight words									
Uses picture clues									
Uses familiar story									
Uses beginning consonants									
Uses beginning and end consonants									
Uses some strategies (mean., syn., phon.)									
Expects reading to make sense									
Expects reading to sound right									
Uses knowledge of letter/sound relationships									
Takes risks without fear of making errors									
STAGE THREE	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
Reads using all strategies (mean., syn., phon.)									
Uses decoding to confirm or disconfirm other strategies									
Self-corrects									
Rereads for meaning									
Reads on to gain meaning									
Retells story (sett., char., theme, plot, res.)									
STAGE FOUR	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
Reads with fluency (expression, rate)									
Silently reads new text independently									
Integrates all strategies (mean., syn., phon.)									
Reads different ways for different purposes									
Comprehends text (literal, inferential, critical)									

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The teacher's knowledge that it takes time for a child to understand what it means to read significantly influenced how she conferenced with the child. She patiently gave Gabriela time to develop and used the portfolio contents to help her identify appropriate instructional strategies that would support Gabriela's shift to the next stage. Also included in the portfolio were running records (Clay 1985) that documented Gabriela's emerging use of the cueing

system and independent reading strategies. She also included Gabriela's progress in retelling stories to document her comprehension skills.

Every portfolio conference was permeated with an attitude of celebration. The teacher encouraged Gabriela by focusing in on the good things Gabriela was doing. She said, "Gabriela, you are using picture clues to read the word," or "You self-corrected that word. Good job!" She also asked Gabriela questions to encourage Gabriela's own reflection on her reading strategies. "Gabriela, you read the word 'open' here. Does that make sense? Does that look right?" The teacher used what she knew about Gabriela's reading process as documented in her portfolio to inform the teacher's own instructional strategies and in conferencing with Gabriela. The portfolio also documented the child's successful growth in her personal construction of the reading process over time.

## Effective Portfolio Assessment of Early Literacy

We have briefly looked at the developmental processes of writing and reading and how this knowledge interacts with portfolio assessment in the classroom. Why is this knowledge crucial to effective portfolio assessment?

Without this knowledge, the early literacy portfolio becomes simply a collection of work. The child is the producer of the work; the teacher is the collector. Without the knowledge of the developmental processes of reading and writing, the portfolio becomes an artifact rather than an interactive, dynamic tool used to support early literacy development.

Let's look again at the three main components of this type of portfolio: 1) documenting student progress/growth; 2) supporting and guiding instruction; and 3) communicating to both the child and parents each child's successful growth.
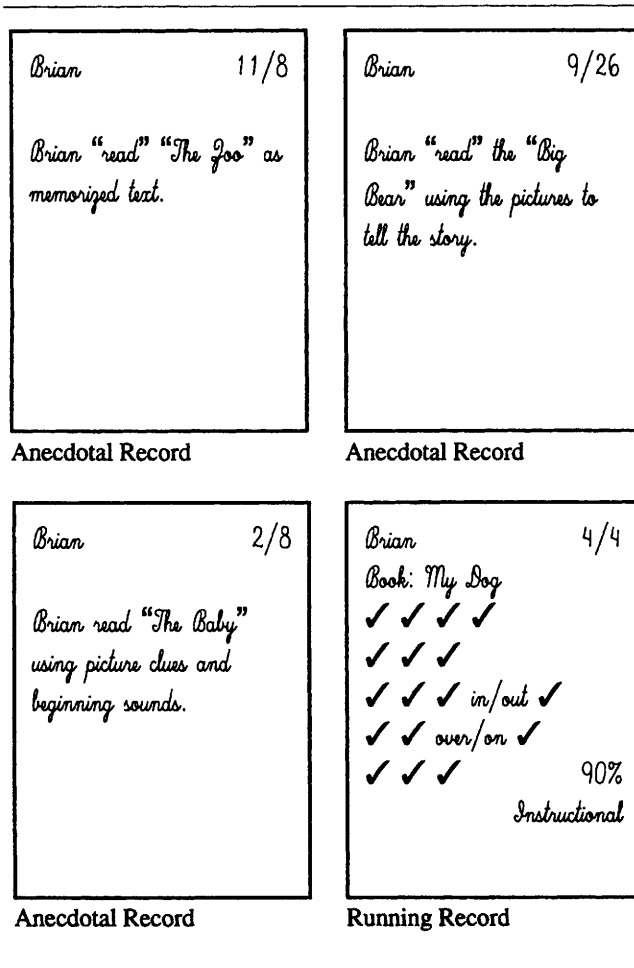
First, an effective literacy development portfolio *documents growth*. It is the knowledge of the developmental process of literacy that gives the teacher a yardstick to measure growth. From the Stages of Writing and the Writing Development Checklist, the teacher knows what to look for as the child constructs her knowledge of the process. The teacher can celebrate the beginning stages of the child: 1) drawing to represent the world, 2) beginning to use letters, 3) using letters for sounds, and 4) writing multiple sentences with many correct spellings. The examples in Figure 5 show how a child's writing in his literacy portfolio document the growth the child has made in the process of becoming a writer.

Figure 5
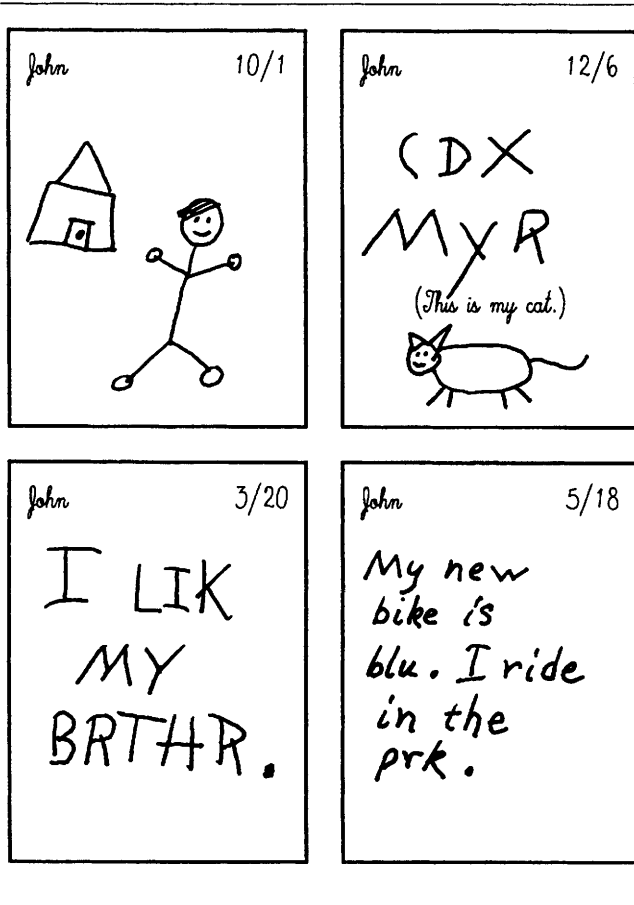
In reading, the teacher recognizes the beginning stages of reading development by using the Stages of Reading Development and the Reading Development Checklist. When a child begins to attend to pictures of a favorite book and tells her own stories, the teacher can document this behavior as emerging literacy. When a child begins to read back her scribbles, the teacher knows the child is beginning the process of learning that print contains meaning. The teacher records when the child uses memorized text and reads with inconsistent strategies at the instructional level as indicated by a running record. The examples in Figure 6 from a child's portfolio document the child's growth in the reading process.

Figure 6

Brian 11/8	*Brian* 9/26
Brian "read" "The Zoo" as memorized text.	*Brian "read" the "Big Bear" using the pictures to tell the story.*
Anecdotal Record	Anecdotal Record

Brian 2/8	*Brian* 4/4
Brian read "The Baby" using picture clues and beginning sounds.	*Book: My Dog* ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ / ✓ ✓ ✓ / ✓ ✓ ✓ in/out ✓ / ✓ ✓ over/on ✓ / ✓ ✓ ✓ 90% *Instructional*
Anecdotal Record	Running Record

As the teacher conducts portfolio conferences with each child about her growth, the child is able to see the progress she has made, thus encouraging the her to continue to grow. The standard is growth on a developmental scale, remembering that each child is an individual developing at her own pace. No one is labeled below or above grade level.

Without the knowledge of the developmental processes of reading and writing, the teacher is unable to celebrate the growth steps because she does not know what to look for. The uninformed teacher may actually

impair the growth of the child, because she does not know the next step in development (Gomez et al. 1991). It is the knowledge of the process of literacy development that gives the teacher reason for celebration, as well as direction in appropriate instructional strategies.

Second, an effective portfolio also *supports and guides instruction*. Knowing the developmental processes of reading and writing directs the teacher to the next growth step she needs to support for the child. For example, if a teacher conducts a portfolio conference with Conrad and discovers he is in the beginning stages of using letters for sounds, the teacher then uses this knowledge from the portfolio to interact with her instruction. As the teacher works with Conrad, she will support him with opportunities to use letters for sounds. As Conrad shows progress in sound-symbol relationships for initial consonants, the teacher will then support him in developing the sound-symbol relationship for vowels. The teacher knows the next developing stage (figures 1 and 2) and is able to intelligently nurture the next step in Conrad's development. Without this knowledge, the teacher is not able to effectively use portfolio assessment to support and guide her instruction.

Lastly, the portfolio *communicates to both children and parents each child's successful growth*. A teacher's knowledge about the process of literacy development enhances conferencing with both children and parents about the contents in the portfolio. The teacher, as well as the child, selects work to represent the growth the child has made. Parents find that the portfolio based on developmental processes gives them more information about their child and an understanding of their child's own literacy development.

For example, in Maria's portfolio, items were chosen to reflect her development throughout the year. Maria began the year at the preletter writing stage. She could draw simple pictures. Within a few months, Maria began to write letters and then strings of letters. By midyear, Maria was using letters as substitutes for sounds. By the end of the year, she was writing simple sentences. The teacher and Maria placed evidence of each stage of development in Maria's portfolio and checked the selections on the developmental checklist. The teacher, Maria, and Maria's parents could celebrate her growth during the year.

Children who are not involved in documenting their own literacy development through portfolios are often denied the opportunity to see for themselves that they are growing and developing in their literacy abilities. Fortunately, Maria had the opportunity through her portfolio to see her progress and celebrate her own success, leading her to see herself as a competent, successful learner.

Knowledge of developmental literacy also helps the teacher effectively interpret literacy growth to the child and parents. To a parent, Charles's scribbles may hold no meaning or value. The parent may only view Charles as one who cannot write letters yet, seeing only what Charles *cannot* do. But the teacher can help the parent see what Charles *can* do. She can help the parent understand that a scribble is an important part of the developmental process of Charles's literacy growth. Charles knows that writing on paper is a way to communicate. The scribble is a positive indication of his emerging understanding of literacy. Only within the context of the developmental process does the child's scribble find merit, and does the child see that what he knows is valuable. The parents also see their child's work as positive stages in his development.

Interactive, Dynamic Tool

The portfolio also provides the tool for children to interact with the knowledge of what they can do and also reflect, as thoughtful evaluators of their own work, on what they will do next on the developmental continuum. As Donald Graves suggests, "The portfolio movement promises one of the best opportunities for students to learn how to examine their own work and participate in the entire literacy/learning process" (Graves and Sunstein 1992, 4).

For the teacher, the early literacy portfolio is a tool to celebrate children's current literacy development which interacts with instruction, so the teacher is able to effectively guide and support future literacy development. The teacher reflects on the child's learning and her own instructional strategies. The teacher reflects on what each piece in the portfolio says about the child's current development, what the next step should be, and what the teacher can do instructionally to support the child's next developmental step. Reflection on the portfolio contents not only guides instruction, but it helps the teacher and child decide on additional contents for the portfolio and set goals together.

What the teacher knows about the developmental process of reading, each child's development, and the evaluation of the development interacts to create a portfolio that is truly dynamic, producing positive change in both the teacher and child. As a dynamic tool, the portfolio supports the assessment of the processes of early literacy development and helps teachers to make changes in instruction in order to meet the needs of the learner, thus becoming a formative assessment that helps children develop.