

DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Early childhood development

**Study guide 2 for
PRS101Y**

Early childhood teaching

**Study guide 2 for
PGC405D**

Early childhood teaching (Part B: Assessment)

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Contents

<i>Study unit</i>	<i>Page</i>
1 PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHING	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 What is the difference between evaluation and assessment?	3
1.3 Purpose of assessing the young child	3
1.3.1 Planning your teaching	3
1.3.2 Improving your teaching	4
1.3.3 Parent guidance and assistance	5
1.3.4 Assessment of the child's level of development	5
1.4 Self-test questions	6
1.4.1 Short questions: test your knowledge	7
1.4.2 Long question: test your insight	7
2 RULES FOR TRUE AND TRUSTWORTHY ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 The nine rules for true and reliable assessments	8
2.2.1 Rule 1: Each child is a unique person	8
2.2.2 Rule 2: Assess the whole child	9
2.2.3 Rule 3: Assess the child in a variety of situations and use a variety of methods	10
2.2.4 Rule 4: Assess both the learning process and the outcomes	11
2.2.5 Rule 5: Assessments should be trustworthy (reliable)	12
2.2.6 Rule 6: Repeat assessments to get valid (true) results	13
2.2.7 Rule 7: Remain objective	14
2.2.8 Rule 8: Know what you are going to assess	15
2.2.9 Rule 9: Assessment must be confidential	15
2.3 Self-test questions	16
2.3.1 Short questions: test your knowledge	16
2.3.2 Long question: test your insight	17
3 THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS	18
3.1 The assessment process	18
3.1.1 Phase 1: Plan	19
3.1.2 Phase 2: Implement (collect and store assessment information)	22
3.1.3 Phase 3: Interpret assessment information	23
3.1.4 Phase 4: Use and communicate assessment results	23
3.2 Conclusion	26
3.3 Self-test questions	26
3.3.1 Short questions: test your knowledge	26
3.3.2 Long question: test your insight and skills	27
4 WAYS OF ASSESSING THE YOUNG CHILD	28
4.1 The importance of assessment and how to do it	28
4.2 Tests	29
4.3 Interviews with parents/caregivers	30
4.4 Portfolios (examples of the child's work)	31

4.5	Observation	33
4.6	Self-test questions	33
4.6.1	Short questions: test your knowledge	34
4.6.2	Long questions: test your insight	34
5	METHODS OF RECORDING OBSERVATIONS	35
5.1	Introduction	35
5.2	Descriptive records	35
5.2.1	Advantages of the descriptive record method	36
5.2.2	Disadvantages of the descriptive record method	36
5.2.3	Guidelines for recording a descriptive report	37
5.3	Developmental check lists	38
5.3.1	Advantages of using developmental check lists	38
5.3.2	Disadvantages of using developmental check lists	39
5.3.3	Guidelines for filling in a check list	39
5.4	The use of space	40
5.4.1	Advantages of the use of space records	40
5.4.2	Disadvantages of the use of space records	40
5.4.3	How to observe the use of space inside and outside the playroom	41
5.4.4	Information gained from observation of a child's use of space	41
5.5	Using other methods of recording observations	43
5.6	Self-test questions	43
5.6.1	Short questions: test your knowledge	43
5.6.2	Long question: test your insight	44
6	INTERPRETATION OF ASSESSMENT INFORMATION	45
6.1	Introduction	45
6.2	Rules you need to know when interpreting assessment information	46
6.2.1	Rule 1: Base your interpretations on all available information on the whole child	46
6.2.2	Rule 2: Normal behaviour can vary greatly	47
6.2.3	Rule 3: Interpretations are only tentative	47
6.2.4	Rule 4: Interpretations are not easy	48
6.2.5	Rule 5: We do have to make decisions	49
6.2.6	Rule 6: Be aware of the "halo effect"	50
6.2.7	Rule 7: Keep in mind that you are biased	51
6.2.8	Rule 8: A team approach results in better interpretations	51
6.2.9	Rule 9: We cannot diagnose a problem	52
6.3	Use and communication of assessment results	52
6.4	Self-test questions	53
6.4.1	Short questions: test your knowledge	53
6.4.2	Long questions: test your insight	54
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

Dear Student

Welcome to Study Guide 2 for PRS101Y and PGC405D. This study guide deals with **assessment in early childhood teaching**. Assessment is one of the most important, but also most difficult, tasks of the educator in an outcomes-based teaching approach. I hope that after you have worked through the study guide you will understand the basic theory concerning assessment and that you will be able to use your knowledge to develop the skills necessary for successful assessment.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any problems or questions arising from your studies.

Best wishes

Reda Davin

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Study unit 1

Purpose of assessment in early childhood teaching

Read the following learning outcomes before you begin. Keep referring to these outcomes as you work through this study unit.

After completing study unit 1 you should be able to:

- explain why assessment and not evaluation is used in early childhood teaching
- explain the purpose of assessment of the child and the teaching effort in early childhood development

Children between the ages of three and six attend an ECD (Early Childhood Development) centre.

Adelle, the principal of Unisa's Centre for Early Childhood Education, calls a staff meeting to discuss, among other things, the reports that have to be sent out to parents at the end of term. When the discussion turns to the assessment of children for the purpose of compiling these reports, Anna, who has recently joined the school, makes the following remark:

"Surely you don't really mean that you do a proper assessment in early childhood teaching? We educators are taught not to judge children's art, or any of their other creative activities, in terms of 'right' or 'wrong'. And besides, if we do judge anything, we focus on the learning process rather than on the end product. This means that we can make general comments about the child, but I cannot see how any definitive assessment is possible."

1.1 Introduction

Perhaps you agree with Anna about assessment in an ECD centre. If so, that is perfectly understandable. Assessment is one of the most difficult tasks a educator has to carry out, and because it is so difficult, it is often done incorrectly, or completely ignored. However, assessment is a vital part of good teaching, whatever the context. Let us see whether we can find some answers to Anna's problems and feelings of uncertainty, by analysing assessment in early childhood teaching.

Besides the teaching effort, assessment of the child is one of the educator's most important tasks in early childhood teaching. Educators have to assess the children in their classes and their own teaching effort.

Assessment is a vital part of good teaching. It is one of the essential building blocks in the planning and presentation of successful, developmentally appropriate presentations and activities for a group in an ECD centre. Unfortunately educators all too often regard assessment as nothing more than an administrative task. Assessment (or evaluation) is just something they must do so that they can fill in the parent report cards for their group and keep the principal and parents happy!

Answer the following question:

Do you agree with the following statement? Give a reason for your answer. "Assessment is an important task because an ECD practitioner has to be able to complete the parent report cards for the children in his or her class."

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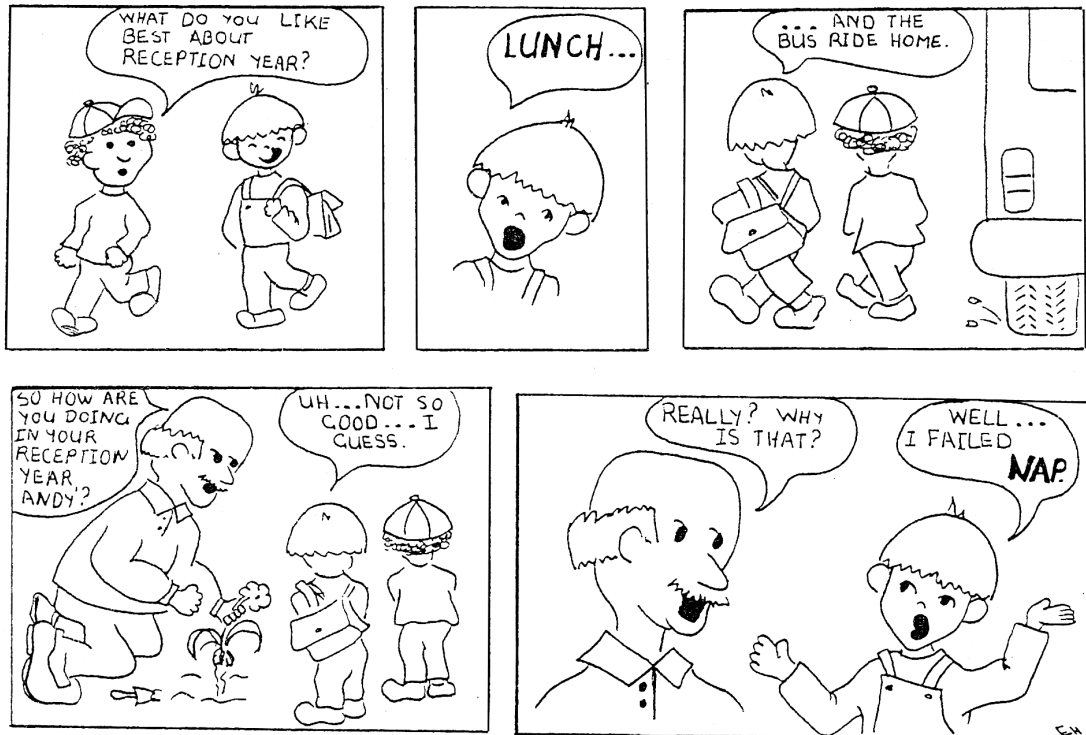
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FIGURE 1.1

The difference between evaluation and assessment

The difference between evaluation assessment



1.2 *What is the difference between evaluation and assessment?*

- Evaluation means making a value judgment about something according to a specific set of standards or measurement.
- Assessment is a process of gathering information to make decisions about the young child. The process should be systematic and based on the child's everyday tasks.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *What is the difference between "evaluation" and assessment?*

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- (2) *Try to think of the way that you were evaluated when you were at school. How do you think it was different from our way of assessing a child in an ECD centre?*

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- (3) *Was the little boy in the above comic strip assessed or was he evaluated? Give a reason for your answer.*

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1.3 *Purpose of assessing the young child*

Assessment cannot be superficial or haphazard. To carry out meaningful assessment, the educator needs to be quite clear about the purpose of assessment and how it should be done. The four main reasons for assessment in early childhood teaching are to plan and improve teaching, to offer parents guidance and assistance, and to determine a child's level of development.

1.3.1 **Planning your teaching**

It is not possible to plan developmentally appropriate themes and activities for children in an ECD centre unless you know your children. The themes applied in an ECD centre must be based on children's interests and needs (the themes must be developmentally appropriate). Therefore the information gathered from your assessment of the children will give you very important guidelines for your planning of suitable themes and activities.

Consult the study unit on choosing learning content in early childhood. This information should help you to understand why it is impossible to choose relevant themes for a child unless you know that child.

Assessment gives you a starting point from which you can make teaching decisions about the suitability of learning outcomes for your particular group, about which teaching methods to choose and about how to plan the playroom.

Answer the following question:

Is it possible to plan for successful teaching in early childhood without assessment? Give reason(s) for your answer.

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1.3.2 Improving your teaching

A very important reason why we assess children is that assessment helps us to improve our teaching. In fact, assessment is the foundation for effective teaching. We can assess the quality of our teaching by using the assessment information gathered during each presentation or activity that we conduct. Through assessment we can adjust or modify our teaching appropriately, thereby improving on our teaching efforts. A good ECD educator will teach and assess simultaneously.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Why is our self-assessment as educators important to our own professional growth?*

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- (2) *“A good ECD educator will teach and assess simultaneously.” What does this sentence mean? Rewrite, using your own words.*

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1.3.3 Parent guidance and assistance

One of the purposes of an ECD centre is to give parents educational assistance in the upbringing of their child. You can only advise or help parents who have problems with their child, if you have in-depth knowledge of the child.

Assessment information serves as an instrument to give parents, in a structured and professional way, information about their child's behaviour and development, especially if there is a potential learning and development barrier.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Give reasons why assessment can help the educator to give parents professional assistance and guidance.*

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- (2) *Give reasons why parents also play an important part in the assessment of their children.*

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1.3.4 Assessment of the child's level of development

There are three main reasons for assessment of the child's developmental level. Assessment is important to meet three important needs:

- to plan developmentally appropriate themes and activities
- to identify children with learning and development barriers
- to adapt teaching to help children with special needs

1.3.4.1 Planning developmentally appropriate teaching

You need to determine the developmental level of every child in your group so that you can plan and present developmentally appropriate themes and activities.

1.3.4.2 Identifying children with developmental and learning barriers

By using assessment information a educator can identify children with possible barriers. The “problems” may vary from a child who has difficulty using scissors, to a child with a hearing barrier who therefore have special educational needs.

When you identify a child who may have a serious barrier, the strategy to follow includes referral to specialists (such as a medical doctor, speech therapist or occupational therapist). In situations like these you will need detailed documentation of your assessment of the child. Assessment records will serve as a basis for communication with the professionals, as well as with the child’s parents.

1.3.4.3 Adapting teaching methods in order to help children with developmental and learning barriers

Consult the topic of the child with special needs which will be discussed in detail in the modules on special needs education, which also form part of your degree or certificate. In these modules we give information that will help you to identify and help children with developmental and learning barriers.

Increasingly, the child with barriers is catered for in a regular school setting. The child’s educator is therefore an integral member of the team who serves this child with special needs and the child’s family. The educator’s assessment records are an information source from which to choose appropriate teaching methods and strategies to help the child. These records also provide a starting point for ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the interventions planned.

1.4 Self-test questions

Now complete the following questions. Doing so will help you to master the competencies set out in the learning outcomes at the beginning of this study unit.

1.4.1 Short questions: test your knowledge

- (1) Do you agree with the following statement? Give a reason for your answer. "In early childhood teaching, assessment of the child is one of the educator's most important tasks." (2)
- (2) In your own words write down the meaning of the word "evaluation". (1)
- (3) In your own words write down what you understand the word "assessment" to mean. (1)
- (4) Explain the difference between "evaluation" and "assessment". (4)
- (5) Give four reasons for the importance of assessment in early childhood. (6)
- (6) Give two ways in which assessment can help to improve teaching. (2)
- (7) Give two ways in which the results of assessment can become guidelines for the planning of teaching. (2)
- (8) Why is assessment important to meaningful parental guidance and assistance? (2)
- (9) Give the three reasons why assessment of the child's level of development is important in early childhood teaching. (3)
- (10) You are a educator in an ECD centre. You identify a child who may have a serious developmental problem. Briefly explain your plan of action to help the child. (5)
- (11) Are the following statements TRUE or FALSE? Give a brief reason for your answer. (16)
 - (a) When a educator refers a child to a specialist his or her involvement with the child stops. TRUE FALSE
 - (b) The educator's assessment records serve as very important sources of information when a child is referred to a specialist for further investigation. TRUE FALSE
 - (c) After assessment the educator will be able to diagnose a serious problem in the child. TRUE FALSE
 - (d) Assessment records are important because they serve as starting points to help children with learning barriers in a school setting. TRUE FALSE
 - (e) Assessment information is used to find the most suitable teaching strategy for the child with problems. TRUE FALSE

1.4.2 Long question: test your insight

You are a educator in an ECD centre. A parent asks you whether the most important purpose of assessing children is to determine school readiness. Write an article for parents in the centre's newsletter, with the title: "Why do we assess your child?"

(Tip: Degree students: Go back to the section on the purpose of early childhood education.)

Study unit 2

Principles for true and trustworthy assessment of young children

Read the following learning outcomes before you begin. Keep referring to these outcomes as you work through this study unit.

After completing study unit 2 you should be able to:

- know and use the most important rules to follow for true and trustworthy assessment of the young child

2.1 Introduction

As the educator you are actively involved with the children in your group. One of the most important criticisms of assessment in early childhood is that the educator makes decisions about the child based on personal feelings. This criticism is valid. We can agree with this criticism because we know that when we use methods such as observation, and look at examples of the child's art and constructions, there can be no such thing as "right" or "wrong"; nor can we ever entirely dismiss the influence of our own backgrounds when we make assessments. For these reasons, certain rules (principles) are very important to achieving true (valid) and trustworthy (reliable) assessments of the young child. When you read books on assessment you will identify certain rules that must be diligently observed in the assessment of a child. I will discuss nine very important rules (but remember there may be other important rules).

2.2 The nine rules for true and reliable assessment

An explanation and discussion of the nine rules required for successful assessment follows.

2.2.1 Rule 1: Each child is a unique person

When assessing a child we must look at each child as a unique human being. This means that the educator should:

- assess the child's unique, individual pattern of development
- not categorise or label a child
- not use words such as "naughty", "lazy" or "highly gifted" to describe a child

- be careful not to over-stress certain negative or positive behaviour since a child very seldom “always” repeats certain behaviour!

Example

Behaviour:

John is not sitting still during story time.

Educator’s assessment:

John cannot sit still for *one moment*. He is *forever* pulling someone’s hair or fiddling. He is really a *very naughty* boy and a troublemaker.

Answer the following question:

In the example the educator made at least three mistakes in the way he assessed John’s behaviour during storytelling. Identify them and state why they are mistakes.

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2.2.2 Rule 2: Assess the whole child

When assessing a child it is important to make sure that you assess every aspect of the child. If the whole child is not assessed, it can lead to oversimplified interpretations of the child. Make sure that you:

- do not have only one assessment of the child
- assess the child under different circumstances and during different activities
- assess the child over the course of the whole day (a child’s behaviour is not necessarily the same throughout the day)
- the assessment involves all aspects of the child and does not reflect a one-sided view of the child

Example

Behaviour:

Thabo is already able to read and he is four years old.

Educator’s assessment:

Thabo is *highly gifted* because he *can read*.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Why is it important to assess the whole child?*

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- (2) *What is wrong with the educator's assessment about Thabo in the above example?*

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2.2.3 Rule 3: Assess the child in a variety of situations and use a variety of methods

When you assess a child you need to use a variety of methods and assess the child in different situations. We can compare this approach to looking at a beautiful view from different windows. Looking at this view from different windows, you will see from each different window something that you were not able to see from another window.

When you assess a child, you need to make use of:

- **Different assessment methods.** We shall discuss the different methods of assessing the child in study units 4 and 5.
- **Various settings inside and outside the playroom.** Assess the child not only in the playroom but also in the outdoor play area. Try to assess the child in as many different situations as possible: only then will you be able to “see the whole picture”.
- **Various times of the day.** Make sure that you assess the child during every part of the day — even in the early morning before school starts and at the end of the day when the child is going home.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Why is it important to assess a child in a variety of situations and to use a variety of methods?*

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- (2) *In your opinion can examinations and tests be classified as a method that can be part of “a variety of situations and a variety of methods”?*

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2.2.4 Rule 4: Assess both the learning process and the outcomes

In traditional examinations and tests only the end product (or learning outcomes) is evaluated. In assessment it is possible (and very important) to assess the learning **process**. The educator should not assess and interpret answers or the end product only, but also the process of how the child arrived at the solutions or end product.

Example

Two children are building exactly the same puzzle and both of them complete their puzzles. The end result (outcome) is the same — both have completed puzzles.

However, the process of getting to the same end product was different: Anna struggled to build the puzzle, but kept on trying until she completed it; Nkopodi completed the puzzle with ease, but the educator had to remind him to complete it because his attention drifted to the other activities in the class.

The same end result can give a educator two different “messages” about the children. The same end product does not mean that the same process was followed to reach the answer or end product. The process the child follows to reach an answer tells the educator more about the child’s development than the mere end product does. When assessing the process it is also possible for the educator to:

- help the child who struggles
- give extra materials / new ideas to the child who needs it
- change the teaching if necessary
- verbalise the child’s learning and by doing so further the child’s development

Answer the following question:

“Assessing the learning process also helps you to improve your teaching.” Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer.

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2.2.5 Rule 5: Assessments should be trustworthy (reliable)

Assessments are trustworthy (reliable) if the same interpretations of behaviour can be made later or in different circumstances.

Example

Behaviour:

Lucy struggles to colour in a picture.

Educator's assessment:

Lucy's small muscle development is not up to the level expected of a five-year-old child.

This assessment is not reliable, because the educator's assessment is based on one incident only. There may be other reasons why Lucy struggles to colour in — she may have hurt her finger or hand or the crayons may be poor quality.

To be able to make reliable assessments, the educator must:

- have more than one assessment of the same behaviour
- limit the negative effects of factors such as environmental distractions, interruptions and unexpected events during the day
- take any negative effects that may occur into account in assessments

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Assessment in early childhood education is often criticised as being "unreliable". Do you agree with this statement?*

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- (2) *What can you as a educator do to make sure that your assessments are reliable?*

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2.2.6 Rule 6: Repeat assessments to get valid (true) results

To get valid assessments, you have to assess what you are supposed to assess and not something else.

Example

Behaviour:

A educator wants to assess a child's ability to complete a pattern. She plans a manipulative activity where the children have to complete a pattern using small coloured beads. Frik struggles to complete the pattern.

Educator's assessment:

Frik has *severe visual perception problems* with regard to skills such as *colour recognition, position in space and visual ordering*.

The interpretation of the assessment is not valid, because the reason for the child's failure to complete the task is not poor visual perception. After further assessments the educator realises that the beads are too small for Frik to pick up with his fingers. In her first assessment of Frik's ability to complete a pattern, the educator unknowingly assessed Frik's small muscle skills and not his visual perception skills. The assessment and interpretation are therefore not valid because the educator did not assess what she intended to assess.

You can strengthen the validity of assessments by not over-emphasising a single assessment. Also, when assessments are obtained in different ways, see if they coincide.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Describe in your own words what you understand by the words "valid assessment" and "reliable assessment".*

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(2) *How can you as a educator make sure that your assessment is valid?*

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2.2.7 Rule 7: Remain objective

As we have said before, you as a educator are actively involved with the children. You are also **part** of their learning process and it is therefore very difficult to remain objective. However, it is important not to allow personal experiences or characteristics to influence perceptions of events, facts or behaviour. As a educator, it is very important not to allow a child's traits or characteristics that you either like or dislike, do or do not accept, to influence your objectivity.

To achieve objectivity, a educator has to:

- record the events as accurately as possible, without making any value judgments
- avoid judgmental comments such as "good", "bad", "naughty", as well as labels or jargon
- take into account that no one can be totally objective because the information we choose to collect is influenced by our personal experiences, beliefs and interests

As educators we therefore have to acknowledge any biases we may have and be aware of them. The most important way to remain objective is to **acknowledge** our feelings and then take them into account when we assess a child.

Answer the following questions:

(1) *Is it possible for a educator to be completely objective in his or her assessments?*

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(2) *Make a very brief list of guidelines for educators to follow that will help them to be more objective.*

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2.2.8 Rule 8: Know what you are going to assess

Assessment must be goal directed. You should determine beforehand **what** you want to know about the child — what you are going to assess. Assessment without a definite goal will lead only to very superficial knowledge of the child. Know what behaviour or aspects of the child you want to assess.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) Why is it important to know what you are going to assess?

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- (2) *How can you make sure that you have goal-directed assessments?*

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2.2.9 Rule 9: Assessment must be confidential

Confidentiality is perhaps one of the most important principles of meaningful assessments. You are going to acquire and assess very sensitive information on a child. Do not discuss any information on a child with any person outside the school. If you feel the need to get expert help in your handling of a child, ask the parents for permission before you discuss the child with any outside person, even if an expert or a specialist.

The fact that you, as a educator, have a legal responsibility to report child abuse or neglect is a heavy responsibility on your shoulders. Handle cases where you suspect child abuse or neglect with the utmost care, because your suspicions may be wrong. Get help from a social worker before you make any accusations.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Discuss methods that educators can use to make sure they uphold professional ethics and confidentiality in their assessments of children.*

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- (2) *Discuss very briefly how you as a educator should respond if you suspect a case of child abuse or neglect in your group.*
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2.3 Self-test questions

Now complete the following questions. Doing so should help you to master the competencies set out in the learning outcomes at the beginning of this study unit.

2.3.1 Short questions: test your knowledge

- (1) Why should you not use words such as “naughty” or “highly gifted” to describe a child during the assessment process? (2)
- (2) Why is it important to assess children on an ongoing basis? (1)
- (3) Why should a child be assessed in various situations? (1)
- (4) Why is it important to assess a child in a variety of situations and to use a variety of assessment methods? (2)
- (5) Why is it important to observe both the end product and the learning process of the young child? Use an example to explain your answer. (5)
- (6) Explain in your own words what is meant by “reliable assessment”. (2)
- (7) Give some guidelines for a new ECD educator to help her achieve reliable assessments. (3)
- (8) Explain in your own words what is meant by “valid assessment”. (2)
- (9) Give some guidelines for a new ECD educator to help her to achieve valid assessments.
- (10) Why is not easy for an ECD educator to make objective assessments? (1)
- (11) How can educators strive for objectivity in their assessments? (3)
- (12) Why is a goal-directed assessment essential to success in assessment? (1)
- (13) Why is it so important to keep observations and assessment results confidential? (1)
- (14) “If you know there is an abused child in your class, the best policy is to give the child lots of love at school but to keep out of the domestic affairs of the parent(s). After all, it is not your problem.” Do you agree with this statement? Give a reason for your answer. (4)

2.3.2 Long question: test your insight

You are asked to run an in-service training session at an ECD workshop on the following topic:

“Principles for reliable and valid assessment of young children”

Do some research by asking ECD educators how they assess the children in their groups and which principles they think are the most important. Then list the principles in order of importance and write a lecture (with practical examples) to present at the workshop.

Study unit 3

The assessment process

Read the following learning outcomes before you begin. Keep referring to these outcomes as you work through this study unit.

After completing study unit 3 you should be able to:

- describe what is meant by the statement that “assessment is a process”
- plan the assessment process
- give reasons for decisions that you make during the assessment process

3.1 The assessment process

As we have already said in study unit 1, assessment is a process. To achieve valid and reliable assessments of the young child you must follow certain rules, which were discussed in study unit 2. However this is not enough: you must also **plan** your assessment with care, because assessment is an entire process of activities consisting of certain steps or actions. The assessment process:

- is systematic
- is well planned
- consists of logical steps
- requires certain action or decisions

Answer the following question:

Describe in your own words what you understand by the statement that “assessment is a process”.

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In order to help you achieve a well-planned assessment of the children in your group, you can follow a **prescribed recipe**. This recipe consists of **four phases**:

- Planning (which consist of five steps)
- Implementering (“Doing”)

- Interpreting
- Communicating

Follow these phases (and their steps) with care when you plan or conduct assessments, especially when you are just starting to assess children. The steps will help you to achieve well-planned, valid and reliable assessment results.

3.1.1 Phase 1: Plan

Step 1: Decide on the general reason for the assessment (why?)

Consult the discussion in study unit 1 (1.3, “Purpose of assessing the young child”).

It is important to decide **why** you want to assess the child or the teaching process. The reason(s) for the assessment will decide the “**what**” and the “**how**” of your assessments.

Answer the following question:

*List at least four different reasons for assessments (**why**).*

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Step 2: Formulate the outcome or behaviour that needs to be assessed (what?)

After you have decided **why** you want to observe, you have to decide exactly **what** you want to assess. **What** you want to assess will link with the learning outcomes of your teaching. It makes no sense to have certain outcomes that you would like to achieve with your group and then to assess something else.

Answer the following question:

Why is it important to have specific objectives for your assessments?

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Step 3: Select the focus (who?)

After you have established **why** you want to assess and **what** you want to assess, you can decide **whom** you want to assess. Your decision about **whom** to assess will depend on the objective(s) of your assessments.

Answer the following question:

Link the correct focus to the objective for assessment.

Outcome/behaviour (why?)	Focus (who?)
1 To determine Thabo's ability to catch a ball while playing outside	a Classroom
2 To determine the effect of changes in the classroom on the group	b Individual child
3 To determine which children are struggling to cut pictures from a magazine during free play activities	c Teaching method
4 To find out which is the best method to use to get all the children's attention before telling a story	d Whole class
5 To determine the success of the theme "Eskimos"	e Small group

Step 4: Select the method(s) of assessment

The use of certain "instruments" or methods will help you to achieve purposeful assessments. Your assessment method will be determined by all the previous steps:

- (1) **Why** do you want to assess the child/teaching process?
- (2) **What** do you want to assess?
- (3) **Whom** do you want to assess?

Go to study units 4 and 5, where these methods of assessment are discussed in detail.

The four most used methods of assessment are:

- (1) **tests** (which we only use under very rare and specific circumstances; we generally refer a child to a specialist for testing)
- (2) **parent interviews**
- (3) **portfolios** (which consist of examples of the children's art and constructions)
- (4) **observation of the child** (using a variety of observation methods such as descriptive methods, developmental check lists and observation of the use of space)

Answer the following question:

Why do you think we use a variety of assessment methods, and not just tests?

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Step 5: Decide on the time and duration of the assessment (when and how long?)

To be able to figure out **when** you are going to assess, you need to keep in mind **what** you want to assess (the outcome or behaviour). It is important to make sure that your assessments are at different times of the day.

Answer the following question:

*Why is it important to assess the child at different times of the day? (Tip: See **rule** 3 in study unit 2.)*

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The decision about **how long** the assessment should last will depend on factors such as:

- **The outcome or behaviour that needs to be assessed.**
Depending on what you want to assess, you can decide **how long** it should last. When you want to assess whether a child can cut with a pair of scissors, the assessment will last a few minutes. When you want to figure out the child's level of motor development your assessment will take at least four weeks. When you want to find out whether a certain teaching method is successful, your assessment will take the duration of the lesson.
- **The method of assessment.** The method of assessment will also determine how long it takes to do the assessment. For example: it may take a whole term to complete a check list, it may take a day to assess the use of space, and completing descriptive records may take no more than ten minutes.
- **How experienced the educator is.** With her competence, after having assessed a number of children over the years, an experienced educator will take less time to complete assessments than a new educator.

Answer the following question:

“The duration of the assessment will also depend on the educator’s experience of observing children.” Do you agree that this statement is correct? Do you think a more experienced educator will be able to complete assessments sooner and still have reliable and valid assessments? Give reasons for your answer.

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3.1.2 Phase 2: Implement (collect and store assessment information)

Steps 1 to 5 are the **planning stage** of the assessment process. After you have decided on each of the five steps, you can start to assess the class/child/teaching effort. Your assessments will be well planned and systematic.

Answer the following question:

Why is it necessary to plan your assessments beforehand?

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One assessment is not enough to make reliable and valid decisions about a child. To get a complete picture of a child you need more than one assessment, using different assessment methods. You will therefore collect information on the child by doing repeated assessments.

All the information about the child must be stored until the time when you are going to **interpret** it. One of the best ways to do this is to open a **personal file** for each child.

Answer the following questions:

(1) *Why is it important to have a personal file for each child?*

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(2) *Visit an ECD centre and ask the principal about what information they usually collect to keep in the child’s personal file.*

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3.1.3 Phase 3: Interpret assessment information

Remember that up to now you have only **collected** information on the child. You will only start to **interpret** all the information after you have collected it from a variety of assessment methods. It is only then that you can assess the child's level of development. In study unit 6 we shall discuss **the interpretation** of information in detail.

3.1.4 Phase 4: Use and communicate assessment results

The whole assessment effort will be a total waste of time if we do not **use** the assessment results. It is very easy to answer the question: "What can we use the assessment results for?" All we have to do is to go back to study unit 1, where we discussed the purpose of assessment in an ECD centre.

We can use assessment results to:

- guide our planning of the teaching effort
- improve our teaching
- give better guidance and assistance to parents
- plan developmentally appropriate themes and activities now that we know the children in their different developmental levels
- identify children with developmental and learning barriers
- adapt our teaching methods to help children with developmental and learning barriers

Answer the following questions (remember to consult study unit 1):

- (1) Can you add any other "uses" for assessment results to the above list?

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- (2) Write very brief notes on **how** you can use assessment results for each of the following purposes:

- (a) to improve your planning of your teaching effort

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- (b) to improve the teaching effort

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- (c) to offer more directed guidance and assistance to parents

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(d) to plan developmentally appropriate themes and activities

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(e) to adapt teaching methods to help children with special needs

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After you have completed the whole assessment process you will need to **inform** the people who need to know about the results. We need to **report to** the following role players:

- the group educator (personal assessment report for each child in the group)
- the child's parents or caregivers
- other professionals (such as specialists to whom we may refer a child with special needs)
- the child's next educator in the ECD centre or the principal of the primary school (for the reception year group)

Because each of these reports will serve a different purpose, each report will emphasise different aspects of the assessment results.

3.1.4.1 Personal assessment report

It is essential to have a report on each child's progress. The assessment report gives at a glance the child's progress over the year. (At the end of the year this report must also be sent to the educator for the next year or to the primary school.)

3.1.4.2 Parent report

Consult study unit 4 for our discussion of parent interviews as a way of collecting information about the child.

The information in the child's personal assessment report must also be sent to or discussed with the child's parents. The parent report or discussion at a parent's interview will be a summary of the personal assessment report. The school will decide how often parents should receive a report — however this must happen at least twice a year.

The best policy is to discuss the parent report with the parents individually. The educator and parents should go through all the information together. This is also a good strategy to follow with parents who are illiterate. Also try to use an interpreter if the parents have a different home language. The guidelines for parent interviews are also applicable to your reports to parents on your assessment of their child.

Remember: You need the parents to help you solve their child's problem. Giving help and support to a child (however big or small the need may be) is part of their task of being parents. It is your task as an educator, however, to make sure that the parents know **what** to do and **how** to do it.

Answer the following question:

After assessment you come to the conclusion that Peter may have a language problem. His vocabulary and sentence construction are not at the level expected of a five year old. Write down three guidelines you need to keep in mind when you inform his parents about this problem.

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3.1.4.3 Reports to other professionals

When you refer a child for further investigation, it is very important that you write a report to the specialist(s) concerned. Depending on the problem, referral may be to a medical doctor or medical specialists, a speech or occupational therapist, or a psychologist, for example.

This report is important because the specialist will see the child in a different setting to the setting in which you work with the child. Your report on the child in a group setting may give valuable insight into the child's problem which will help the specialist make an accurate diagnosis of the child's specific problem.

3.1.4.4 Report to another ECD centre or the primary school

When a child moves from one ECD centre to another centre, or goes to primary school, it is important to give the new principal an assessment report on the child. Valuable resources will be lost if the new educator is not informed about a child's possible problems or strengths.

3.2 Conclusion

Now you have worked through the whole assessment process. We shall deal with some of the ten steps of the process in more detail in the following study units. Remember to keep the whole picture of the process in mind when you study these study units. All the themes that follow are part of the assessment process, and not separate themes.

3.3 Self-test questions

Complete the following questions. Doing so should help you to master the learning outcomes set out at the beginning of this study unit.

3.3.1 Short questions: test your knowledge

- (1) Name four characteristics of the assessment process. (4)
- (2) Is it important to **plan** the assessment process with as much care as you would plan any other teaching activity? Give a reason for your answer. (3)
- (3) "To be able to assess successfully, you must know **what** you want to assess. This '**what**' will link up with the outcomes of your teaching effort." Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer very briefly. (2)
- (4) What is important to remember when you choose the focus of your assessment? (1)
- (5) Give two important points to consider when you decide on the time (**when**) the assessment will take place. (2)
- (6) List the five factors that will help you decide how long your observation should last. (5)
- (7) "ECD educators will get all the information that they need to assess a child by observing the child." Do you agree with this statement? Give a reason for your answer. (2)
- (8) What is the best way to store all the assessment information you have collected about a child? (1)
- (9) After you have collected and stored information about the child, what is your next step or task in assessment of the child? (1)
- (10) Name the four people who would most commonly be informed of a child's assessment results and give one reason why you would inform them. (4)
- (11) Fill in the missing word: The entire evaluation process will be in vain if we do not ... (1)
- (12) What is the purpose of compiling a personal assessment report on each child? (2)
- (13) What is the link between a child's personal assessment report and the parent report? (1)
- (14) How often must parents receive a report on their child's progress at an ECD centre? (2)
- (15) "The purpose of both parent interviews and parent reports is to communicate information about the child to the parents.

For this reason the principal and educator can decide which method of communication they want to implement in their school.” Do you agree with these statements? Substantiate your answer. (3)

- (16) When referring a child to a specialist for further investigation, you as the ECD educator have the very important task of compiling a report on the child. Why is this report so important? (2)

3.3.2 Long question: test your insight and skills

- (1) Read the following scenario:

Peter is a very lively boy. He struggles to concentrate during story time, but when he does block building he sits and concentrates for a long time. He also prefers to play alone. You wonder about Peter’s social development.

Use steps 1 to 5 to plan a process for your assessment of Peter. Following these steps will help you to plan!

STEP 1: What is the general reason for the assessment?

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STEP 2: What is the outcome or behaviour that needs to be assessed?

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STEP 3: Who is the focus of the assessment?

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STEP 4: What assessment method(s) are you going to use?

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STEP 5: During which presentation (time in the daily programme) will the assessment be done how long will it take (its duration)?

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Study unit 4

Ways of assessing the young child

Read the following learning outcomes before you begin. Keep referring to these outcomes as you work through this study unit.

After completing study unit 4 you should be able to:

- critically discuss the most important methods of assessment in early childhood education and substantiate the use of each method
- use tests, interviews with parents and portfolios of the child's work as methods of assessment in the practical teaching situation
- explain why we use observation as an important method to obtain information about the young child

4.1 The importance of assessment and how to do it

To be able to assess a child the ECD educator needs **information** about the child. You as the educator then use the information to plan more responsive and effective teaching, to get to know a child and to help a child in his or her development. Assessing children gives us insight into **why** children make errors or have problems with certain skills — therefore, we do not just find out what they do right or wrong (McFee & Leong 1994:3). This information that you gather from your ongoing assessment provides a foundation for effective teaching. You are able to assess both the quality and outcomes of the teaching effort.

As mentioned earlier, educators make use of four different assessment methods to gather information:

- tests
- interviews with the parents/caregivers
- portfolios (examples of the child's work)
- observation of the child using different observation methods

Answer the following question:

"Is it possible to assess a child without having information about the child?" Give a reason for your answer.

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4.2 Tests

Tests are often used to assess the child's level of development and to "screen" the child. The best-known and most used tests on the young child are the "school-readiness" tests. These tests are used to screen children to see whether or not they are ready for school. The use of school-readiness tests is one of the big debates in early childhood education.

Tests are not part of the normal assessment procedures in an ECD centre.

Educators need special training to administer standardised tests, and they seldom receive this training because the tests are not used very often. To be effective, school-readiness (or any standardised) tests have to be done according to very strict rules, under specific conditions as set out in a test manual, and following strict instructions and timing. Without all this, the results will be useless.

Danger:

tests and young children (Seefeldt & Barbour 1990:170)

No test score may be used to:

- deny children access to an early childhood programme
- fail children
- place children in remedial, developmental or special classes/ groups

Answer the following questions:

(1) *What are "standardised tests"?*

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(2) *Why are tests not part of normal, assessment procedures in an ECD centre?*

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- (3) *Name three decisions that **cannot** be based on test results. Can you give an example where tests have been used to make these decisions about a child? Do you think it is fair to the child to make a decision based on a single test result? Give a reason for your answer.*

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4.3 Interviews with parents/caregivers

Interviews with parents are an important source of information on the child and are also a way of involving the parent in the school. Never underestimate a parent's intuitive feelings about a child. Most parents think that their children are wonderful and clever (and they should think so). For this reason, if parents have a concern about their child, investigate this concern. They are often right!

It may sometimes even be necessary to visit the parents' home for an interview. A visit to the parent's home can reveal a great deal about the parents' way of life, economic situation, cultural background and style of upbringing. However, educators must be careful not to make inappropriate remarks or ask hurtful questions, particularly about religion or the parents' financial position (Landsberg 1996:9).

It is important to follow up after an interview — if not, the interview will be no more than a friendly "chat" between parent and educator which leads to nothing helpful. The educator must make notes of the interview and put them in the child's file.

Interviews with parents are an important means of communication between school (educator) and home (parents/caregivers). However, it is important to remember that if they are not handled in a professional and caring manner, interviews can **block** communication between home and school. Be careful not to have a "know-it-all" attitude, and be sensitive to language and cultural differences.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Why is an interview with parents a very important source of information on the young child?*
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- (2) *What is the value of visiting the parents at home for an interview?*
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- (3) *When visiting and interviewing parents the educator must be careful not to offend parents. Give at least two guidelines on how a educator can avoid being offensive or insensitive.*
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- (4) *Why is it possible that interviews, although an excellent way of establishing communication between home and school, can **block** communication? Also state how you will make sure that interviews do not block communication.*
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- (5) *Why is it important to make notes of the interview and put them in the child's file?*
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- (6) *Design a form that can be used to write down notes during a parent interview. Ask an experienced educator (and consult relevant textbooks) to help you with this task.*

4.4 Portfolios (examples of the child's work)

A portfolio containing examples of the young child's work will consist of a collection of the child's paintings and drawings, and photographs or drawings of constructions that the child has built during the year.

The educator can decide what needs to be collected in a portfolio, but at an ECD centre usually artwork (which includes first attempts at writing) and three-dimensional constructions are collected.

Examples of this work are important assessment tools for the following reasons:

- They give a **visual** progress report of the child. The educator can **see** how the child's work has changed.
- They can be used to answer questions about the child's development. For example: "Are the child's cutting skills improving or not?"
- They illustrate progress or regression in the child's development. Is the child developing or is the child regressing in certain ways?

A educator's analysis of examples of a child's work, together with information from parent interviews and observations on the child, will provide a record of the child's learning and development. This record will make it possible for the educator to **see** clearly how each child is progressing, as well as any possible problem areas.

The following are guidelines to using portfolios as a method to obtain assessment information:

- (1) Never come to a conclusion based on a single example of a child's work. The quality of a child's work will vary and change — a single excellent picture or building does not mean a child is gifted, and a single weak piece of work is not an indication of regression (the child is not developing but certain behaviour is actually deteriorating).
- (2) Do not use "popular psychology" to analyse children's pictures — black does **not** mean depression; a human figure without arms does **not** indicate a cold and unloving mother! Always ask children to explain their pictures and write their "story" down.
- (3) Organise the samples of the child's work in sections. Make sure that each sample has a date and add any additional information that may be relevant for later interpretations of the samples. A standard prepared form can be very helpful when you assess examples of a child's work.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Do you agree that examples of the child's work are an important source of information on the child? Give reasons for your answer.*

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- (2) *Give guidelines to a new educator on how to use samples of the child's work as a method of obtaining information on a child.*

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4.5 Observation

Observation is the most important method of obtaining information on the young child. By using observation the educator gets **firsthand** information on the child, in everyday situations.

Consult study unit 5, where we discuss all of these observation methods.

To direct our observation of the child we use three methods of recording our observations:

- **Descriptive records.** When you use descriptive records you write down in detail your observation of what happens to and with the child. This method helps you to assess the child's reactions as a whole person in different situations. It also gives you insight into the child as a **unique** human. Descriptive records are also useful because the ECD educator can use them to analyse the effectiveness of the teaching effort.
- **Developmental check lists.** Developmental check lists help the educator to focus on a specific aspect or skill in the child's development.
- **Participation charts.** The use of participation charts involves a plan of the playroom or outdoor play area. The educator has to fill in how often and for how long children visit the different areas or take part in certain activities. This method helps the educator to carry out planning of the playroom area, and also to indicate which activities a child tries to avoid or always take part in.

4.6 Self-test questions

Now complete the following questions. Doing so should help you to master the competencies set out in the learning outcomes at the beginning of this study unit.

4.6.1 Short questions: test your knowledge

- (1) Name the four most useful methods of assessment for early childhood teaching.
- (2) In **your** opinion which one of these methods is the **most** important? Or are they all equally important? Give a reason for your answer. (2)
- (3) Is the use of tests (for example school-readiness tests) to “screen” children an acceptable practice? (2)
- (4) Give reasons why testing is not part of the everyday assessment in early childhood. Base your reasons on the tests themselves. (4)
- (5) “Never underestimate a parent’s intuitive feelings about a child.” Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer. (2)
- (6) During an interview, why is it important for parents to feel that they are valued people with good ideas and insight into their child? (2)
- (7) You are interviewing the parents of a child with possible language development problems. The parents deny that there is any problem. They do not even want to send their child for further testing. How would you handle the parents? (4)
- (8) What is the value of collecting examples of children’s work for assessment? (1)
- (9) When you look through the portfolio of a five-year-old child in the reception year you start to notice that the child uses a lot of black in his drawings and paintings. His drawings and paintings usually have a lot of detail, and are realistic with a ground and air line (a horizon). What do you think about this? (Tip: Read your notes on art in the study guide for PRS1034.) (4)
- (10) Give a brief definition of the concept of observation. (2)

4.6.2 Long questions: test your insight

- (1) “Tests should be used with great caution and should be administered by specially trained people only.” Give reasons why you agree with this statement.
- (2) Discuss *interviews with parents* as a method of assessment in early childhood teaching.
- (3) Discuss *examples of the child’s work* as a method of assessment in early childhood teaching.
- (4) You are a educator at an ECD centre. The ECD centre is a link to a primary school. The principal asks you to test the children in your group in order to complete school reports for them. She wants these reports to be the same as reports that you would complete if you were a educator for the foundation phase at primary school. You tell the principal that you cannot use the same methods. You are then asked to complete a document which will be submitted to the school governing body on:
 - (a) how children in the ECD centre will be assessed
 - (b) why formal testing is not the most suitable method to assess the young child

Study unit 5

Methods of recording observations

Read the following learning outcomes before you begin. Keep referring to these outcomes as you work through this study unit.

After completing study unit 5 you should be able to:

- discuss and implement the necessary skills to use descriptive records, developmental check lists and space records as important methods of recording observations in early childhood
- substantiate the use of descriptive records, developmental check lists and the space records as important methods of recording observations

5.1 Introduction

As mentioned in study unit 4, we use different methods to record our observations of the child. The two methods most used to record observations in early childhood development are descriptive reports and developmental check lists. We will discuss both methods in more detail in this study unit. The method of recording the use of space is not used a lot. It is however a very important method for the ECD practitioner, which is why we have included it in this study unit.

The best way to **know** the methods is to **use** them. Please use these methods in your group. You will find that the more you use them, the easier they will become!

5.2 Descriptive records

The most common way of gathering information on the child is to listen to and watch them. Descriptive reports are therefore an excellent method of recording information about the child because they are “pictures written down” (McAfee & Leong 1994:81). A descriptive report is a continuous written record of everything that is said or done during the observation period. We usually write descriptive reports as we are observing the behaviour. Although it is the most valuable of all methods of recording observations it is also the most difficult. It is not possible to observe 30 children at a time: therefore, to make reliable descriptive reports, you have to focus on a particular problem, behaviour or situation.

Through focused observation the educator:

- listens for **verbal** responses, which include not only **what** the child says but also the child's tone of voice, pronunciation of words, and use of words
- also watches for **nonverbal** responses, which include the child's gestures or movements, and facial expressions
- describes the **circumstances** in which the behaviour takes place

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Write down in your own words what you understand by "descriptive records".*

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- (2) *Why is the making of descriptive reports not an easy method to record observations?*

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5.2.1 Advantages of the descriptive record method

- It is a direct way to obtain information about the child.
- It can be unobtrusive — children do not have to be aware that they are being observed.
- Descriptive reporting takes place during normal daily lessons and activities — no changes in the daily routine are needed.
- The method of descriptive reporting requires the minimum of equipment.
- It preserves information in a form that is the closest to what really happens to the child, in the playroom and the outside play area.

5.2.2 Disadvantages of the descriptive record method

- It is time-consuming.
- Good descriptive records require no interruptions in reporting.
- To be able to make reliable interpretations you need lots of information. One single observation is not enough.
- It can inhibit or discourage interaction with the rest of the group.
- The use of language as the descriptive tool requires that the educator has a wide vocabulary and a skilful recorder.
- Descriptive reports recorded several hours after the actual observation may not be reliable.

Complete the following questions:

- (1) *For more "advantages" or "disadvantages", talk to any educator who uses descriptive records.*

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- (2) *What do you regard as the biggest advantage and the biggest disadvantage of descriptive reporting? Give reasons for your answer.*

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5.2.3 Guidelines for recording a descriptive report

- Probably the simplest way to write down the observation information is to use large index cards, one for each child. Each card should have the following information:
 - the child's name
 - date of birth
 - age
 - date of each new entry
- Make a habit of keeping note cards and a pencil in your pocket.
- Divide the children in your group into **five** small groups, and for **one** week observe the children in each small group for one day. (By the end of the week you will have observed all the children in your group.)
- To make sure that you can observe one child at a time, allocate a special time slot for each child on the day concerned.
- Each time that you observe a child, make sure that the observation is at a different time or during a different presentation from your previous observation(s) of the child.
- Observe the child for not longer than ten minutes at a time.
- Focus on a specific child, behaviour or problem — know what you want to observe.
- Describe the surrounding environment as well as what happened just before the observation and what followed it.
- Observe verbal and nonverbal behaviour.
- Use words that convey exactly what the child says and does.
- If you cannot write down the information immediately, use a tape recorder or take photographs — to make the information as reliable as possible.
- Interpret descriptive records written **after** the observation with caution because your memory may not be reliable.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *May you write down your observations afterwards, or must you write them down while you are doing your observations? Give a reason for your answer.*

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- (2) *Give three guidelines on how you will make sure that your descriptive reports are valid and reliable.*

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5.3 *Developmental check lists*

When we use developmental check lists we record expected behaviour. We identify the behaviour we would like to observe, before the observation begins, and develop a list (check list) of the behaviour. We can compile check lists using sources such as:

- the learning outcomes of the ECD centre/group
- developmental milestones

Remember: Check lists are not **tests**! They are only a way to keep track of how a child is progressing.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *In your own words describe what is meant by “developmental check lists”.*

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- (2) *Name two sources that you can use to compile a developmental check list.*

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- (3) *What is the difference between check lists and tests?*

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- (4) *Why do we use developmental check lists?*

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5.3.1 Advantages of using developmental check lists

- Large amounts of information are recorded quickly.
- Check lists are flexible and versatile. They can be changed and adapted to fit in with specific circumstances.

- It is easy to analyse and interpret them.
- It is easy to train people to use check lists.
- Check lists keep track of a child's progress and achievements at a specific time.

5.3.2 Disadvantages of using developmental check lists

- Check lists that contain only a few items must be interpreted with caution.
- Check lists may oversimplify complex behaviour and learning.
- Unexpected behaviour (not identified in the check list) may not be recorded.

Answer the following question:

What do you regard as the biggest advantage and the biggest disadvantage of using developmental check lists? Give a reason for your answer.

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5.3.3 Guidelines for filling in a check list

- Divide the group into five groups once again and observe the group over a period of a week.
- Develop your own coding system to fill in the check list. To help you with your own coding system, here are a few hints:
 - **Items that the child can do / has mastered or cannot do / has not mastered.** Mark these items with a tick (✓), an X, or by writing "Yes" or "No".
 - **Items begun, or performed partially (not completed).** Mark these items with a slash (/), which you can then change to a tick (✓) when the child has mastered the item. Another possibility is to use a B for "begun" or a P for "partial".
 - **Items not observed because the child was absent or the target behaviour was not observed.** Use a blank (no mark) or a special code such as A for "absent" and N/O for "not observed".

Remember: When you fill in check lists over a period of time you create a record of the child's development.

Answer the following question:

How can you use check lists as a source of information to assess a child's developmental progress?

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5.4 Participation charts

We observe the use of space because participation charts (also called space records) are a good way of showing how often a child participates in a certain activity. Records on the use of space offer insight into:

- a child's preferences in the different activities
- a child's patterns of participation
- the group's social structure and interactions (eg to show whether some children **always** play alone — who are being pushed aside by the group)
- a child's preferred activity or activities over a period (if filled in over a period of time)
- activities or areas in the playroom that are under-used or over-used
- how successful the layout of the playroom is

Answer the following question:

"Records on the use of space, as a way to record observations, help educators to improve their teaching." Do you agree with this statement? Give a reason for your answer.

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5.4.1 Advantages of participation charts

- They are a simple and quick way of recording participation.
- They are easy to interpret.
- They supply information about social structures and interactions that other methods may overlook.

5.4.2 Disadvantages of participation charts

- The rate of participation may not necessarily reflect how much a child is learning.
- To achieve valid interpretations you will need to repeat the observations a few times.

- As with descriptive reporting, you need to record during observation. Otherwise your records may not be reliable.

5.4.3 How to use participation charts inside and outside the playroom

- Draw a plan of the playroom or outdoor play area that you want to observe.
- Decide on the children you want to observe beforehand. (Tip: Divide your group into 10 small groups and observe that number of children during free play indoors and free play outdoors, every day for a week. Make sure that you observe all the children during that week.)
- While observing the children, write down their names and the time spent in the different play areas. (Tip: Make use of a code for each child — use their initials or simplified symbols.)
- Write down where each child is, every 10 to 15 minutes. Decide beforehand how long the intervals between your observations are going to be.
- Repeat your observations of the use of space at least once a month.

Remember: You may think that this exercise will take a lot of time. But all you have to do is look around every 10 or 15 minutes, locate the one or two children you have decided to observe, and note down where they are.

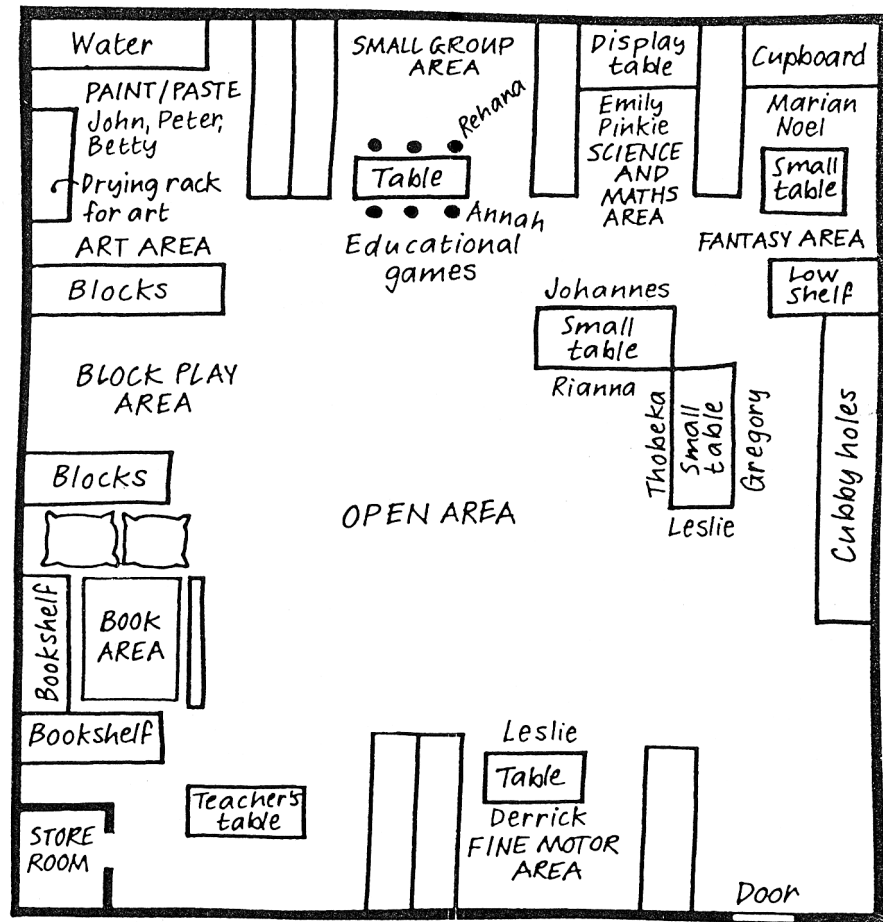
Do not interpret your observations on their own: go back to previous space records on these children and see if you can find any patterns in their participation.

5.4.4 Information gained from observation of a child's use of space

- You can identify children who do not stay in an area for more than five minutes.
- You can identify area(s) that a specific child never or very seldom visits.
- You can identify area(s) in the playroom that is/are not or very seldom visited by the children in your group.
- You can identify children who spend a whole period in only one area.
- You can establish the **traffic flow** in your playroom. This information will help you to plan your playroom better.

FIGURE 5.1

An example of the use of space



Source: Faber and Van Staden (1997:191)

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *When we analyse participation charts, what may the following information possibly tell us about a child, the playroom or the activities presented?*

(a) *The child does not stay in an area for more than five minutes.*

.....

(b) *The child does not visit the art area for a whole week.*

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(c) *The child spends the whole day in the book area.*

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(d) *Only one child visits the book area and only for five minutes.*

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- (2) *Do you think observation of the use of space is an important observation method? Give a reason for your answer.*

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5.5 Using other methods of recording observations

There are other methods of recording observations that can be used in the observation of young children. You will find information on these methods when you read books on assessment and also when you talk to other educators. The three methods discussed in this study unit are the most important methods, and they are also easy to use and to interpret. As an ECD practitioner (and student) you are more than welcome to use any method of recording observations, as long as it is valid and reliable.

5.6 Self-test questions

Now complete the following questions. Doing so should help you to master the competencies set out in the learning outcomes at the beginning of this study unit.

5.6.1 Short questions: test your knowledge

- (1) Explain briefly what is meant by each of the following types of observation:
 - (a) descriptive reports
 - (b) participation charts
 - (c) developmental check lists (6)
- (2) What is the most important advantage of descriptive reports? (1)
- (3) How long do you have to observe a child when you compile a descriptive record? (1)
- (4) Why is descriptive reporting regarded as the most difficult method of recording observations? (2)
- (5) What is the most important value of developmental check lists? (1)
- (6) "Check lists are the same as tests." Do you agree with this statement? Give a reason for your answer. (2)
- (7) What is, in your opinion, the most important contribution and purpose of completing developmental check lists on children in an ECD centre? (2)

- (8) What do you think is the most important advantage of using participation charts as an observation tool? (1)
- (9) How often should you repeat your observations on the use of space in order to achieve useful records? (1)
- (10) When you interpret participation charts, is one observation enough? Give reasons for your answer. (2)

5.6.2 Long question: test your insight

Complete the following table to compare descriptive records, developmental check lists and the use of space as methods to record observations.

METHOD OF RECORDING	DESCRIPTIVE RECORDS	DEVELOPMENTAL CHECK LISTS	PARTICIPATION CHARTS
MAIN REASON FOR USING THE METHOD			
BIGGEST ADVANTAGE OF THE METHOD			
BIGGEST DISADVANTAGE OF THE METHOD			
GUIDELINES FOR USE			

Study unit 6

Interpretation of assessment information

Read the following learning outcomes before you begin. Keep referring to these outcomes as you work through this study unit.

After completing study unit 6 you should be able to:

- interpret the assessment results in a meaningful and responsible way
- use assessment results to realise the purpose of assessment
- communicate the results of assessment to all stakeholders in a professional manner

6.1 Introduction

To be able to assess the child, you as the ECD educator have to interpret the information that you have collected about the child. Interpretation of information is **the** most important phase in assessment. Educators agree that it is very important to gather information about the child, which is why they collect and store this information in well-organised personal files. Unfortunately most educators tend to think that this is where the assessment begins and ends. However, to be of **value**, the information that you have collected on the child must be **interpreted** and **used**.

You can only start assessment of a child **after** you have **collected** and **interpreted** all the information on this child. You can only **assess** and make certain decisions about the child, after you have taken all the available information into consideration.

Answer the following question:

*Why do you think **interpretation** of information is the most important phase in assessment?*

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6.2 Rules you need to know when interpreting assessment information

We have discussed rules (principles) to guide you when you assess a child. There are also ten rules or principles that you must know to achieve true and trustworthy interpretations of assessment information.

6.2.1 Rule 1: Base your interpretations on all available information on the whole child

When you start to interpret the information make sure that you take all the available information into account and that you look at the whole child. Do not focus only on certain skills or aspects. Therefore:

- Do not look at information on only one aspect of the child. Take the **whole** child into account.

Example:

Do not base your interpretations only on information about a child's visual skills or only on examples of a child's drawings.

Look at information collected from different sources. The following sources may guide your interpretation:

- Look at your notes and find out whether, during the parent interview, the parents talked or asked about things that also concern you about the child.
- Look at different examples of the child's work that cover a period of time. Try to identify whether the examples show progress (indication of growth and development) or regression.
- If the child has been tested by a specialist, ask the questions: What was the reason for the test(s)? What were the results of the test(s)? Do you agree with the results?
- Look at the information in the child's observation records, which was obtained by different recording methods. All the information in the developmental check lists, descriptive records and space records will tell you more about the child.

When you add all the information together, does it make a complete picture of the child or are there unanswered questions in some area(s)? If so, identify the area(s) and assess the child further.

Answer the following question:

How can you make sure that your interpretations of assessment information consider the whole child and do not focus on perceptual skills only?

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6.2.2 Rule 2: Normal behaviour can vary greatly

Even the best books on child development differ on the question: “What is normal behaviour?” “Normal” behaviour can vary greatly and each child has a unique and individual pattern of development. So be careful not to identify “developmental problems” too hastily — make sure that your interpretation is correct by using different methods and sources of information (see the discussion on rule 1).

Answer the following question:

When we interpret information about a child we are always looking for any behaviour that varies from “normal” behaviour. Do you agree with this approach? Give a reason for your answer.

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6.2.3 Rule 3: Interpretations are only tentative

Interpretations of information can only be tentative, because children change rapidly. Even under the best circumstances an assessment of a child is based only on a small sample of what the child can do. Some important information about the child is also difficult to observe and to interpret. Interpretations should only reflect what you as the educator really **know** about the child and not what you think (or assume).

Remember: Behaviour related to motivation, willingness, family support and encouragement, for example, is difficult to assess and can have a major influence on a child’s future development.

Answer the following questions:

(1) *Why must our interpretation of assessment information be tentative?*

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- (2) *Does the statement that “interpretations are tentative only” mean that you can **never** make a decision or an assessment about a child? Give a reason for your answer.*
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- (3) *Read the statement in the “Remember box” above. Briefly explain the link between rule 3 and this statement.*
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6.2.4 Rule 4: Interpretations are not easy

It is never easy to interpret a child’s behaviour. When you interpret information keep the following in mind:

- Human behaviour is **not** fixed. It changes.
- Young children are impressionable and can be easily influenced in their behaviour. Your observations of examples of a child’s work will never give a full indication of a child’s developmental level.

Example:

We are not the same every day — some days we feel on top of the world and other days everything is a hassle. A young child’s behaviour may be even more erratic than an adult’s behaviour.

- We cannot be completely precise when it comes to a young child’s development and learning. What we may know about a child is only an **indication** of what the child is capable of. (A child’s behaviour at a certain point can vary within a wider interval, which reflects the upper and lower limits of the child’s capabilities at that point.)
- Information about a child can have different meanings, because human development is complex and not always easy to understand. We cannot say that, because a child does certain things, the only interpretation possible is Y (that there might be no other interpretation).

Example:

Nkopodi is a shy, quiet boy. A possible interpretation may be that Nkopodi is not well (a positive interpretation). Another interpretation may be that Nkopodi lacks self-confidence (a negative interpretation). These are two very different interpretations of the same behaviour.

Answer the following question:

Why are interpretations of assessment information not easy?

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6.2.5 Rule 5: We do have to make decisions

Earlier we stressed that all interpretations are tentative. This does not mean that we should never make a decision about a child. When you interpret the information, you will have to make a decision about the child's developmental level and behaviour. One of the most important reasons for assessment is to make decisions about the child.

Remember: Our decisions about a child —

- are not fixed and may be changed
- do not exclude a child from any kind of opportunity
- are not in the form of “**the child can/cannot ...**”

To be able to make decisions about a child we have to:

- determine a child's level of development
- identify a child's potential problems/strengths

As part of your degree or certificate in early childhood development you will also have to complete modules on developmental and learning barriers and special needs education. The identification of children with special needs will be discussed in full in these modules.

Sometimes it is hard for us as ECD educators to admit, even to ourselves, that a child has a possible developmental problem. As discussed before, it is not always easy to decide whether a child's behaviour is unique, but still within the range of “normal development”, or whether the behaviour or development is a “red light” (a learning or developmental barrier).

Often the ECD educator will be the first person to identify a possible problem. No educator has all the knowledge necessary to deal adequately with all children and with all problems. Some children need to be referred to specialists. Children who need referral are children with repeated patterns of behaviour that alert the educator. One or two incidents of behaviour that cause alarm will require the educator's attention, but consistent patterns of “problem” behaviour call for further action.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *What kind of information will alert you to investigate a child's development further?*

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- (2) *What is the main difference between the decisions that an ECD educator has to make when interpreting assessment information and an ECD educator's "judgment" or "evaluation" of the young child?*

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6.2.6 Rule 6: Be aware of the "halo effect"

ECD educators must also be aware of the "halo effect". The "halo effect" occurs when we interpret a child's behaviour either very favourably or very unfavourably, because of certain exceptional behaviour. It is very easy for an ECD educator to fall into the trap of the "halo effect".

Example:

It is easy to interpret all behaviour in a favourable way if a child has an exceptionally sweet and cute personality.

Children who are exceptionally strong in certain skills or more advanced than the rest of the group will not necessarily be better at everything else as well. It is important to keep in mind that children develop unevenly, both with regard to a given developmental area and to the whole child. You should base your assessment on all the information available.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *In one sentence explain the "halo effect".*

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- (2) *Have you ever come across the "halo effect" in your own teaching or maybe even in your own study efforts? Very briefly describe your experience.*

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- (3) *Give two strategies that you can use to avoid the "halo effect" in your interpretations.*

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6.2.7 Rule 7: Keep in mind that you are biased

Consult rule 7, “Remain objective”, in study unit 2.

All the knowledge, values, attitudes and experiences that you have act as filters through which you interpret assessment information. Your interpretation of the information can never be totally objective: it will always be influenced by who you are. Because no two individuals are exactly alike, no two persons will interpret the same information in the same way. It is not easy to remain objective when we interpret information on a child. The only way to achieve interpretations that are as objective as possible is to acknowledge any biased feelings and take them into consideration.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Why is it so difficult to remain objective when we interpret assessment information?*

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- (2) *Give two tips for ECD educators on how to achieve more objective interpretations of assessment information.*

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6.2.8 Rule 8: A team approach results in better interpretations

The best way to interpret assessment is to use a team approach. This means that the information is being looked at and interpreted by the principal and all educators involved with the child. Robison (1983:43) writes that a team approach results in better plans for teaching and for resolving a child's problems.

A team approach is not always possible but is advisable, if you are able to use a team. Using the team approach is also an excellent way to counteract bias and achieve more objective interpretations, because the information is interpreted by different people with different viewpoints.

Answer the following questions:

- (1) *Why do you think a team approach is not always possible?*

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- (2) *Why do you think the use of a team approach results in better teaching and resolution of a child's problems?*

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6.2.9 Rule 9: We cannot diagnose a problem

Our assessment methods are not diagnostic tools and we therefore cannot diagnose a problem in children. We can only **identify** possible developmental or learning barriers — but any diagnoses (if necessary) must be made by a relevant specialist (pediatrician, neurologist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, or other specialist).

Example:

We cannot tell a parent that a child **is** hyperactive, gifted or hard of hearing.

We can only **identify** that the child's behaviour suggests a possible problem and that further investigation, by a specialist, is needed.

6.3 Use and communication of assessment results

Consult step 10 in study unit 3, on the use and communication of assessment results.

The whole assessment effort will be a total waste if we do not **use** the results. You as a educator have to **use** the results to better your teaching effort, to be able to direct the teaching to accommodate the needs of the group and individual children and to help the parents in the upbringing of their child.

We also have to **communicate** the results with all the role players. They are the educators currently involved with the child, future educators and the child's caregivers/parents, as well as a specialist or specialists if a child is referred for possible developmental or other problems.

Remember that without this last step the whole assessment process is worthless. Assessment is one of the cornerstones of successful early childhood and OBE teaching.

After her discussion with the principal Adelle, during the staff meeting, Anna is even more overwhelmed by the whole assessment process. It is as if there are more questions than answers. She is still not 100 per cent convinced that assessment, as set out by OBE theory and also as implemented at Unisa's Centre for Early Childhood Education, is workable. Anna is a very diligent worker and decides to take the Unisa study guides on the topic of assessment and work through them thoroughly. She goes back to the minutes of the staff meeting and reads the comments that she made about assessment:

- It is not possible to have proper assessment in early childhood.
- Educators are taught not to judge children's art, or any of their other creative activities, in terms of "right" or "wrong".
- We do not judge anything: we focus on the learning process rather than on the end product.
- Assessment in ECD is a general commentary on the child. It is not a definitive assessment.

After she has worked through the study guides and had a few discussions with Reda, the lecturer, she feels more secure and starts to understand the whole process and underlying philosophy much better — to tell the truth, she starts to agree that this is the best way to "evaluate" the young child!

Do you agree with her?

6.4 Self-test questions

Now complete the following questions. Doing so should help you to master the competencies set out in the learning outcomes at the beginning of this study unit.

6.4.1 Short questions: test your knowledge

- (1) In your opinion, which component of the assessment process is the most important? Explain your answer. (2)
- (2) Why is it important, when you interpret assessment information, to make sure that you take **all** the available information into account and that you look at the whole child? (2)
- (3) Explain very briefly how you would make sure that you base your interpretations on information that will include the **whole** child. (5)
- (4) Explain the following statement in your own words: "Normal behaviour can vary greatly." (2)
- (5) Why are our interpretations of assessment results "tentative"? (2)
- (6) Does the above (questions 4 and 5) mean that we cannot make decisions about the child? (2)
- (7) "It is not easy to interpret assessment information." Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer. (5)
- (8) Explain the "halo effect" that can occur when we interpret assessment results. (2)
- (9) How can you avoid the "halo effect" when you interpret assessment information? (2)
- (10) Is it possible to be totally unbiased and objective when we interpret assessment information? Explain your answer. (2)
- (11) How can you be more objective in your interpretation of assessment information? (1)
- (12) Why is a team approach recommended when we assess a young child? (1)
- (13) Can you diagnose a child? Explain your answer. (2)

- (14) What is the difference between “identifying” and “diagnosing” a problem in a child? (2)
- (15) Complete the following sentence: “The whole assessment effort will be a waste if we do not ... and ...” (2)

6.4.2 Long questions: test your insight

- (1) Write a short informative essay for your ECD centre’s weekly newsletter, called “How we interpret assessment information and how (to whom) we communicate it” (Your essay may not be longer than two typed pages.)
- (2) When you interpret assessment information about the child, you have to keep certain principles in mind. You also have to keep these principles in mind to ensure that the whole assessment process is reliable and valid. Write an article for *The Early Education Journal* on the following topic:

“Principles for valid and reliable assessment and principles for interpretation of assessment information — Are they the same?”

- (3) Because you are the only staff member who is trained in the “new” assessment theory and practice, the principal asks you to work out a day workshop on the topic “Assessment in early childhood.

Plan and write the following:

- (a) programme for the day
- (b) brief hand-out notes on practical sessions (where the educators apply theory, for example by practising assessment methods)
- (c) brief hand-out notes (outlines, mind maps, summaries, etc) on the theory

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