

Introduction: Listening to Learning

CHAPTER

#1

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When we started teaching young children, we wanted to be proficient and skilled in our daily work with them. We participated in student teaching and watched more experienced teachers carry out lessons. In our early years of teaching, we often felt frustrated that we were not able to put into practice the many details in our minds. Too often, the details felt like a jumble of educational goals, images of effective practice, advice from colleagues about managing immediate situations with children, and what our own experiences suggested we try. We often had difficulty articulating what was not working and why. We were not always sure what would help close the gap between our less-skilled attempts to teach and the work of experienced teachers whose orchestrating of learning unfolds smoothly, efficiently, and in a well-organized way.

Effective teaching derives from a sense of agency – a sense of awareness and certainty that professionals bring to decisions that must be made nonstop throughout the day while “not missing a beat.” An important fact about effective teaching skills is that they are learned – every single one of the skills involved. As educators, we can and need to be able to delineate, account for, and practice the skills involved. *Listening to Learning* sets out a pathway to effective teaching of children aged three to six while uncovering the skills and decisions that teachers make when they observe and listen carefully to their children.

The most basic teaching skills that all teachers and childcare providers learn are observing children and listening to what they say for

clues about what they are learning – about letters and numbers, ideas and other people – how to make friends, how to discuss problems and come to new understandings. Our colleague, Sam Meisels, reminds us that the word *assessment* comes from the old Latin word meaning, “to sit alongside of,” to listen without judging, and, instead, listen for understanding. That is the meaning that we bring to the processes of assessing and getting to know children that can strengthen teaching that we offer in this book. We describe how early childhood professionals can assess children while they are engaged in everyday learning activities by listening to their thinking in order to understand how to more effectively teach and guide their learning. The tool and process we introduce for this is called *Bridging*.

The *Bridging* assessment process offers a structure for novice teachers and childcare providers as well as veteran professionals to notice how they set up opportunities for children to learn in different curricular activities. Having prepared the environment with materials and set the schedule for the day, teachers and providers then observe and listen carefully for what children know and can do. Furthermore, they discover what learning is unfolding in this moment in time for each child along with noticing what factors might strengthen and enhance their learning such as adjusting the materials being used, the set-up of the activity, and how children work in various groupings. In this way, teachers learn how to strengthen and refine their teaching through learning to assess children. Thus, we offer a pathway to effective teaching grounded in teachers assessing children in everyday activities by sitting alongside them in order to get to know them better and become the teacher that the children need. The following vignette illustrates the *Bridging* process in action.

Once upon a time, a little girl, she ride on the pony. Then she flew with the eagles. And she went home and got dressed for school. Then she ride on a helicopter and ride on a ghost.

Ms. Drake approaches a table where several four-year-old boys are making puzzles. She asks if anyone has a story they'd like to tell today that she will write down for them. Two boys, Maurice and Gabriel, eagerly respond, “I do!” Maurice takes the lead and begins dictating his imaginative story, with Gabriel listening intently.

When he's done, Ms. Drake says, “Maurice, great story! I think the group will like the idea of the girl flying with the eagles. We will act this out at group time.” Ms. Drake then asks Gabriel if he wants to tell a story, and he responds eagerly with, “Yes!” This time, it's Maurice's turn to listen.

In these few minutes of the school day, Ms. Drake has engaged these two boys in an assessment process using the tool *Bridging*. As the boys' teacher, Ms. Drake is an active participant in this assessment activity. She is not an outside testing specialist administering an assessment divorced from the events and context of the school day. On the contrary, Ms. Drake seamlessly integrates this *Bridging* assessment activity into the school

day's natural flow of events. As she listens to these two children and writes down their stories, she has a prime opportunity to sample and assess her children's narrative skills, oral language expression, and creative spontaneity. In her classroom, the *Bridging* assessment process is fully integrated into the curriculum, becoming an essential and organic aspect of the learning environment.

What Is *Bridging*?

Bridging is a structured, observational assessment tool for children aged three to six who are in childcare settings, preschool, or kindergarten. The structure consists of five routine instructional activities commonly used in many early childhood settings. The five activities represent key content areas of learning for young children. These content areas build the foundations for thinking and problem-solving in learning to read and write; mathematics; the visual arts; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The activities include pretend play, dictating and acting out children's stories, counting collections, drawing a self-portrait, and building strong houses for the three pigs. Table 1.1 provides a summary of the five *Bridging* activities.

An instructional routine is a structured and systematic approach that educators use to guide and organize the teaching and learning process in an early childhood setting. It is a consistent and repeatable sequence of activities designed to achieve specific educational objectives such as the daily practice of reading storybooks to young children. Instructional

Table 1.1 *Bridging* Curriculum Areas and Assessment Activities

CURRICULUM AREAS	ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES
Cross-content Learning	Pretend Play: Children learn to engage in sustained imaginative role-playing activities to foster creativity and symbolic thinking as well as listening and social skills.
Language and Literacy	Dictating and Acting out a Story: Children tell a short impromptu story one-on-one with the teacher who writes it down, reads it back to the child to ensure clarity and accuracy, and finally, at a group time, invites the class to act out the stories they have created.
Mathematics	Counting Collections: Children count items to determine how many are in a "collection" of objects. Then they draw and/or make a written representation of how many they counted and how they counted.
Visual Arts	Drawing a Self-Portrait: Children use a pencil to create a self-portrait portraying themselves with family members or friends at home, in childcare, or in school.
STEM	Strong Houses for the Three Pigs: Children use play doh or clay, craft sticks, and other materials to build houses for the pigs in <i>The Three Little Pigs</i> fairy tale.

routines provide a framework for teachers and childcare providers to deliver content, engage children, and facilitate learning effectively. As seen in [Table 1.1](#), although the five instructional routine activities vary by content area and specific goals, they share the following characteristics in the *Bridging* assessment process.

- ▶ **Equitable:** Each activity has a low floor and a high ceiling, ensuring that children of different ages and skill levels can actively participate and thereby provide evidence of their competency and understanding. These activities offer ample and equitable opportunities for every child to shine. They also enable teachers and childcare providers to discern the diverse knowledge and skills that individual children bring to the group.
- ▶ **Developmental:** These activities build on extensive research work and field practice, ensuring that the key concepts and skills relevant to children aged three to six are sufficiently represented. Each activity includes a performance rubric that delineates the developmental pathways for the activity's key concepts and skills to emerge in young children's learning over the preschool and kindergarten years.
- ▶ **Economical:** The activities require minimal materials and little preparation and implementation time from the provider or teacher. The basic supplies including paper, pencils, and counting manipulatives are easily accessible and affordable, making the assessment process practical and viable for teachers and providers in any environment. This makes it possible for educators to devote their energy to understanding and supporting each child's learning.
- ▶ **Interactive:** Each activity draws children into an engaging learning environment that has built-in opportunities for them to collaborate and help each other. Examples include children working together to enact stories and construct a sturdy house for the three little pigs. Such activities not only enhance individual children's engagement and participation but also create a sense of connection and friendship with peers. As a result, children are more inclined to become focused and participate in the activity, which brings out their optimal performance.

Most importantly, the five routine instructional activities are used here to seamlessly bridge classroom assessment with the teaching and learning process, which is why we named this tool ***Bridging***. As an assessment tool, the activities serve as a dipstick to tap children's learning and skill development in five content areas that are foundational in early childhood education. In addition, these versatile activities can be implemented anytime during the school year, supporting

children's development of key concepts and skills while documenting their progress in these essential curriculum areas. The predictability and familiarity of these routines create comfort and security for teachers and providers with their children, enabling a more effective focus on understanding the concepts and skills being learned.

Bridging empowers teachers and providers to monitor children's learning in real time, observing how children engage in everyday yet challenging activities. This curriculum-embedded assessment doesn't separate children from routine activities with isolated test questions to see what they know and can do. Instead, it uses specific, regularly occurring activities to examine children's learning up close – as if under a microscope – to better understand what and how children learn.

As teachers and childcare providers observe, document, and analyze children's learning across different curricular areas, *Bridging* enhances their ability to recognize key features of thinking and learning. This knowledge makes teachers and providers more skilled educators by informing their planning and implementation of upcoming lessons. Specifically, *Bridging* helps teachers and childcare providers reach the following goals:

- **Understanding key concepts and skills:** *Bridging* activities help teachers and providers develop a solid understanding of key concepts and skills in different content areas of learning that children aged three to six are working on;
- **Assessing the content and process of children's learning:** *Bridging* activities give teachers and providers information on how to identify children's current developmental accomplishments within each content area while also recognizing the working approaches children use in their learning; and
- **Understanding how to use assessment results to inform teaching:** Each *Bridging* activity description provides guidance on how to utilize the knowledge gained during the assessment process to help teachers and childcare providers refine and enhance their teaching practices. This guidance ensures that teachers and providers meet the diverse learning needs of children from various cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and developmental backgrounds.

How Does *Bridging* Differ From Other Child Assessments?

Bridging serves a distinct purpose in facilitating early childhood teaching and learning. It is an assessment process, but it is neither a comprehensive curriculum assessment nor a state accountability tool measuring how much a student learned due to instruction. It also is not a developmental screening instrument for tracking whether a child meets typical developmental milestones. This tool is not designed to evaluate curriculum,

teaching methods, or the overall quality of early childhood programs. In addition, *Bridging* activities are not add-on tasks to the school day.

Instead, *Bridging* offers a valuable child assessment process that involves gathering, organizing, and interpreting observations of children while they are engaged in their daily interactive learning activities. Teachers and childcare providers can assess children's real-time learning progress utilizing carefully established rubrics, which identify children's current developmental achievements and anticipated growth in the coming weeks and months. The rich and authentic information collected through *Bridging* can be used in parent conferences, school reports, or as sources of evidence of learning for mandated accountability assessments within the center, school, or district.

Moreover, *Bridging* activities not only offer insights into children's cognitive functioning but also shed light on the social supports and connections from their home, school, and community environments that contribute to their learning. Each variable that teachers and childcare providers identify, including social and emotional, linguistic, community, and cultural factors, enriches their understanding of the child. As teachers and providers adapt *Bridging* activities to cater to specific groups of children, the assessment process reaffirms the power, relevance, and enduring impact of learning for all children in their diverse and unique contexts.

In early childhood classrooms, teachers prefer assessing children through ongoing observation in an authentic learning environment rather than relying on traditional "sit-down" paper-and-pencil approaches. *Bridging* is an example of such an authentic assessment. Although this form of assessment is generally preferred, it does come with challenges. One significant drawback is that it takes time and cannot be done quickly in a single sitting. Moreover, a risk exists that certain behaviors or skills may not naturally emerge or be adequately observed by teachers or providers, especially for children of a different culture or race than the teacher or provider, and for those with English as a second language. Some children may initially be reticent, or their behaviors may not be fully understood by teachers and providers (Curenton et al., 2020).

The *Bridging* approach offers a solution by using five routine learning activities as the centerpiece of the assessment. These five activities are manageable for classroom teachers and childcare providers while addressing essential curriculum content areas for early learning. They can be readily carried out while providing a structured framework for capturing children's awareness of and proficiency with important basic skills and concepts. Another key feature of *Bridging* is that all children participate in the same activities. This approach ensures equitable assessment of the instruction given, materials used, and procedures followed. These activities also are designed to connect readily with children's home and community experiences, enabling teachers and providers to learn about children's funds of knowledge through storytelling, drawing, pretend play, and counting games.

Bridging also stands apart from other observational assessments through its explicit and direct connection to classroom teaching and learning. The *Bridging* assessment process begins with teachers and childcare providers observing children engaging in various routine instructional activities across different curricular areas. These simple routines can be continuously implemented in the classroom to support children's growing proficiency with concepts and skills in the five curricular areas. Thus, *Bridging* fosters an ongoing process of observation and assessment, allowing for continuous refinement in teaching. By directly linking assessment to daily teaching and learning activities, *Bridging* narrows the gap between assessment and instructional practices.

Who Are the Primary Users of *Bridging*?

The primary users of *Bridging* are early childhood professionals involved in the care and education of young children three to six years of age. This includes preservice teacher educators and their student teachers and childcare professionals as well as in-service professional development providers supporting classroom teachers and providers working in early childhood classrooms and family or kin childcare settings.

For preservice teacher preparation programs, we have used the *Bridging* assessment process in several courses teacher education students take – including assessment courses, curriculum methods courses, and student teaching seminars. For example, when our students were required to complete the edTPA (a national teacher performance licensing assessment), the *Bridging* process equipped them to effectively plan, implement, and assess children's learning in small-group activities. The *Bridging* assessment activities are highly applicable to the edTPA assessment process because they are derived from the early childhood curriculum and offer valuable insights into carefully observing what children learn and how they approach challenges (Chen & McNamee, 2006; McNamee et al., 2008).

Professional development providers can also use *Bridging* to support teachers and childcare providers in several ways. First, this tool helps early childhood professionals hone their observational skills. Second, it deepens their understanding of key concepts and skills in essential early childhood curriculum areas. It also enables them to identify developmental progress markers between aged three and six. Finally, *Bridging* helps educators see that classroom assessment and effective teaching are two sides of the same coin. Early childhood educators can conduct professional learning sessions to engage teachers in understanding how to implement *Bridging* as *both* an instructional practice and an assessment tool in the classroom. This book provides the necessary materials for these professional development sessions, including the conceptual framework for the tool and process, activity descriptions, assessment rubrics, and suggestions for further teaching.

For childcare providers and those who support them whether it be in center-based or home-based settings, *Bridging* provides a lens into the common early childhood activities they are likely providing for young children such as pretend play, drawing activities, and opportunities to count. *Bridging* activities give providers and those they interact with a means to ensure that children are receiving quality care and education along with a way to talk about what children are learning and how they learn over time. *Bridging* activities can be carried out with two or three children, or with children participating in a classroom alongside 18–20 peers.

While individual teachers or providers can use *Bridging* in their classrooms or home care settings, its potential is even greater when teachers and providers collaborate on an ongoing basis. By providing a set of activities covering both preschool and kindergarten years, *Bridging* offers teachers and providers a shared lens and common language to discuss, compare, and reflect on their teaching experiences and children's learning. These professional discussions among teachers and providers play a crucial role in building and maintaining a cohesive program. Moreover, they enable teachers and providers to articulate and refine their approaches to meeting the diverse needs of all children during the crucial early childhood years when the foundation for school learning is being established.

Teachers and providers thrive when compatible working relationships exist with colleagues both within and across grade levels. *Bridging* can bring teachers and providers together to address shared goals by increasing their understanding of children's learning from one year to the next in integrated, sustained, and generative ways. For an early childhood program to be strong and effective, the teachers, providers, and administrators need a shared vision and curricular pathway to achieve desired outcomes. Educators' responsibilities are not complete until their individual effort joins with the talents of colleagues to contribute to meeting the mission and goals of the school. *Bridging* supports the development of such professional learning communities among teachers, providers, and school or childcare agency administrators.

How Does This Book Differ From the Previous Edition?

In 2007, we published *Bridging: Assessment for Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms, PreK–3*, with Corwin Press after years of research and fieldwork. The *Bridging* assessment in the 2007 edition consists of 15 activities in five content areas: language arts and literacy, visual arts, mathematics, sciences, and performing arts. Over the last 15 years, our student teachers have used *Bridging* assessment activities in their classrooms with young children. We also have offered *Bridging* professional development to teachers nationally and internationally.

Teacher educators across the country have written to us about their experiences using *Bridging* assessment activities.

This new edition incorporates significant revisions resulting from our insights and feedback from colleagues who have used the tool with pre-service and in-service teachers. Additionally, we have considered the changes in the field of classroom assessment in early education. In this updated edition, we focus the assessment process on the preschool and kindergarten years, instead of spanning from preschool through third grade. This more targeted age range ensures that the assessment process, performance rubric, and suggestions for *Bridging* assessment to teaching are developmentally appropriate for this hardest of all age groups to assess. (Chapter 3 will go into more detail on the challenges involved.)

In this updated edition, we have streamlined the content, reducing the number of activities from 15 to 5. This makes it more manageable for teachers and childcare providers to incorporate the activities into their regular teaching practice. A departure from the last edition is the highlighting of the role of instructional routines in the *Bridging* assessment process in this edition. All five activities, whether newly developed or significantly revised, are designed to maintain their effectiveness in linking assessment results to the daily teaching and learning process.

The assessment of pretend play in this updated edition warrants special mention. We recognize the well-documented importance of play in a child's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language, and creative development. Young children spend considerable time engaging in pretend play, but many early childhood professionals may lack specific knowledge on how to support it so that children reach their full potential. The pretend play activity in the *Bridging* assessment addresses this gap by outlining pathways in development and delineating indicators contributing to pretend play development in the early years. This gives early childhood educators valuable insights and a roadmap to support children's quality play experiences in school and childcare settings.

Despite these differences, the name of the assessment remains the same – *Bridging*. The overall message of *Bridging* also remains unchanged: effective classroom assessment is integrated into the curriculum to support child development and learning. This revised *Bridging* edition is tailored to meet the needs of teachers and childcare providers by giving them a valuable tool to engage in meaningful assessment and effective instruction.

How Is This Book Organized?

This book consists of three sections: this overview (Chapters 1–5), *Bridging* assessment activities (Chapters 6–10), and appendices. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the *Bridging* approach of listening and observing young children learning while they are engaged in activities. Chapter 2 delves into *Bridging's* approach to evaluating the content and process of children's learning. It includes a detailed description of how

these two learning dimensions are assessed using performance rubrics and working approach rubrics. Additionally, this chapter outlines how to construct a child's learning profile to summarize the assessment results across all five activities.

In Chapter 3, the spotlight shifts to activity theory and the pivotal concept of "basic activities." This concept marks a theoretical breakthrough in the realm of assessment and serves as a guiding framework for *Bridging* assessment.

Chapter 4 focuses on educator agency within the *Bridging* assessment process. *Bridging* empowers teachers and childcare providers with flexibility and creative space to effectively tailoring the tool to address the specific needs of their students and attain targeted educational objectives.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides a case study that illustrates *Bridging's* practical application within a classroom setting. This example illustrates the interrelatedness between assessment and teaching, highlighting *Bridging's* unique advantage in fostering teacher and provider reflective practice and collaboration while concurrently achieving the goals of early childhood education for children aged three to six.

In Section II, Chapters 6 to 10 provide in-depth descriptions of the five assessment activities: pretend play, dictating and acting out stories, counting collections, drawing a self-portrait, and building strong houses for the three pigs. Each activity chapter starts with a brief introduction, followed by comments on the significance of the activity and its key concepts and skills. We then offer a snapshot of the assessment activity being conducted in an early childhood classroom, along with details on the materials needed and implementation procedures. To support teachers and providers in their diverse classrooms, each chapter concludes with "*Bridging* Assessment to Teaching" which offers options to further facilitate children's learning based on each child's learning profile.

Section III consists of the appendices which provide forms needed to conduct the *Bridging* assessment. For each assessment activity, the appendices include (1) recording sheets for teachers and providers to document what children do and say while working on the assessment task. The sheets also have space to record what children create in their design or thinking process (see Appendix A); (2) a performance rubric for each activity with indicators for each developmental level in completing the task as the child gains more knowledge and skill in that content area over time (see Appendix B); and (3) rubrics for the two working approaches – productive and descriptive – summarizing how children approach the task. Working approaches are the same across all five activities (see Appendix C). Finally, (4) we provide a "Child's Learning Profile Summary" sheet which organizes and summarizes each child's assessment findings across the five activities (see Appendix D). We also have included a glossary of assessment terms used throughout the text, making it easier for readers to understand the concepts presented.

Throughout the book, we have integrated classroom snapshots of teachers and childcare providers working with children in the different

assessment tasks based on our experiences working with early childhood educators. These snapshots offer both inspiration and a realistic sense of the challenges teachers and providers face as they engage in the rewarding journey of planning for, overseeing, and orchestrating children's learning each day.

Listening to Learning opens a window for teachers and childcare providers to see the workings of learning and teaching unfold in front of them each day. Teaching and assessment of children's learning begins with the teacher or provider observing children while they engage in activities in varied curricular areas. Teachers and providers' observations are guided by specific rubrics that detail the developmental trajectories of children's learning and understanding in different subject areas, as well as the way they approach the learning tasks. Teachers and providers then continue the *Bridging* process by planning and implementing a curriculum based on the newly acquired knowledge of children's status in the content areas assessed. The unique feature of *Bridging* is the direct connection it makes between assessment findings and next steps in planning for tomorrow's learning. In this way, *Bridging* spans the often-wide chasm between assessment and curriculum by providing a seamless process that intertwines assessment with curriculum. The next chapter sets out the structure of the *Bridging* assessment tool.

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