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# Educator Agency in *Bridging* Assessment

## CHAPTER #4

- Classroom Snapshot: Ms. Curtis and Her Preschoolers
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- Interpreter
- Translator

*Bridging* affords us the chance to see the details teachers and childcare providers are considering in their decision-making before, during, and after a day with young children. *Bridging* offers guidance and support for the development of early childhood teachers' skills and knowledge while they are in the process of guiding their children's learning. By examining the work of skilled teaching in each activity, *Bridging* can help novice teachers and childcare providers find a path for moving toward the proficiency they seek. *Bridging* also helps more experienced early childhood professionals fine-tune, reflect on, and articulate what they are doing when things are going well for children in an activity as well as the skills they hope to further develop. In short, teachers and providers are in control of the *Bridging* process. This chapter helps teachers and providers become more aware of the decisions they are making through the school day that affect children's learning. Through the lens of the *Bridging* process, teachers and providers can examine their skills in teaching and monitoring young children's learning throughout the day and the school year and recognize the opportunities they are seeking to influence their children's learning.

Table 4.1 summarizes the thinking that teachers and childcare providers engage in while planning and carrying out *Bridging* assessment activities. The chart highlights the active decision-making role teachers and providers engage in during lessons and activities with their children all day long.

To provide a practical illustration of these *Bridging* roles, we offer a snapshot from a preschool classroom featuring Ms. Curtis and her

**Table 4.1** Teacher and Childcare Provider Agency in the *Bridging* Assessment Process

ASSESSMENT PROCESS	EDUCATOR'S AGENCY
<b>Before the assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider ways to introduce the <i>Bridging</i> assessment activity to children.</li> <li>• Understand the key concepts and skills in the activity and the pathway of children's development in that content area.</li> <li>• Organize specific materials needed for the assessment activity.</li> <li>• Decide on the time of day to implement the assessment activity.</li> <li>• Invite children to participate in the activity and support their work throughout the process.</li> </ul>
<b>During the assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage children in the assessment activity.</li> <li>• Observe children's behavior, gestures, and comments throughout the activity.</li> <li>• Record children's performance and working approaches on assessment activities using rubrics.</li> <li>• Take notes on each child's interactions with materials and peers.</li> </ul>
<b>After the assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look for patterns and relationships in a child's assessment performances and patterns for groups of children.</li> <li>• Seek to find strengths and areas needing further experience and attention in the near future.</li> <li>• Identify points of entry for individual children who need help in particular areas of the curriculum.</li> <li>• Use results to inform setting curriculum goals, selecting materials, and designing future learning activities.</li> </ul>

four-year-old children. It highlights the work of a teacher in action. The discussion that follows provides an analysis of how effective teaching derives from the agency educators have in shaping the way a satisfying learning experience unfolds in a school day.

## Classroom Snapshot: Ms. Curtis and Her Preschoolers

Ms. Curtis teaches preschool in a community-based center. It is early December in the school year. The recent Thanksgiving holiday and the approaching winter holiday break bring a flurry of intense activity to the children's play. Today the children's pretend play is grounded in the most important holiday to a young child: having a birthday. The following notes reflect our edited version of Ms. Curtis's account of what happened that morning.

Two four-year-old girls, Maria and Ruby, hang up their coats and notice cookie trays on a table with magnetic alphabet letters in a basket. Ms. Curtis greets them, saying, "Good morning, girls! Ooh, do you see what I put out on our table this morning? Come look." The girls sit next to each other and pull a cookie tray close to them.

Ms. Curtis picks up the basket of alphabet letters and places it between the girls, saying, “Here are our alphabet letters. You can make your own words with these. You can make your name, big words, small words, or even a word with one letter!” The girls each dig into the basket of colorful letters and begin to feel the letters in their hands. Ms. Curtis steps back as the girls begin their explorations.

**Maria:** “Hey, my baby’s gonna have a birthday.”

**Ruby:** “Mine too. They need a birthday party. Let’s bake a cake.”

Both girls take letters one at a time from the basket and line up the letters across the top of their cookie sheets. Maria makes a row across the top and then down both sides. She is filling in the space from the outer edges toward the center. Ruby sticks to making lines of letters while pushing them tight against each other like puzzle pieces so they have as little space as possible between them.

Ruby then reaches over to a basket of pattern blocks on the nearby shelf, picks out small one-inch blue squares, and places them above her alphabet letters as decoration. Maria takes different colored shapes from the basket and decorates her alphabet cake with brown diamonds, red circles, and yellow hexagons.

After a few minutes, Ms. Curtis comes closer to their table and says, “Yum, you have an alphabet cake! Is there a message on your cakes with all those letters making words?”

Ruby says, “We bakin’ cakes. My baby’s havin a birthday.”

Maria responds, “My baby is having the whole class come to her birthday. I’m making a big cake. All my cousins are coming too. We gotta bake a nice cake.” The girls continue adding to their cakes for several more minutes.

With the image of Ms. Curtis and her children in mind, we now look at each of the five roles for teachers in the *Bridging* assessment process more closely.

## Decision-Maker

The teacher and childcare provider’s role as a decision-maker is particularly apparent before conducting the *Bridging* assessment. During the preparation phase, the teacher or provider:

- determines the windows of time for assessment during the school year;
- plans for how many children to assess at any one time and which activities to use; and
- locates opportunities to embed assessment activities in the daily routines, considering when and where to make activities available.

Teachers and childcare providers revisit the key concepts and skills embodied in the activity. Then, they identify the expected range of performance for children in the class as a starting point for observation. When making decisions, the teacher or provider draws on her knowledge of individual children, the activity's key concepts and skills, and ways in which the activity can invite the children's participation.

Ms. Curtis decided to assess each child's pretend play from late November through December. She set up her classroom with a tapestry of activities spread across the room. Ms. Curtis arrived early that morning to ensure that materials and furniture were set up and ready for the children's school day. Through quick coordination with her assistant, Ms. Curtis ensured a balance between supervision and assessment for the morning. As the children entered, put away their belongings, and eagerly found something interesting, Ms. Curtis spotted Ruby and Maria selecting the alphabet letters and cookie sheets table. She chose them as her assessment focus for the morning. With her watchful eye, Ms. Curtis monitored the classroom while focused on listening to the children's conversation and taking notes.

Unlike many traditional assessments that tell teachers and providers what to do and how to do it, *Bridging* depends on teachers and providers deciding what is best for their classroom and their children. *Bridging* invites teachers and providers to fully use their experience and expertise in decision-making to set the stage for children to engage in learning activities on their strongest footing.

In the case of Ms. Curtis's classroom, she had the activity and play areas set up so that they were conducive to small groups of children playing together. Her first allegiance was to support the children in good play and exploration; she did not manipulate play settings or redirect children to facilitate the assessment process. Instead, she seized a moment to collect assessment data as the opportunity arose. She did not start the day knowing exactly who she would observe or where she might position herself in the room. She started with one goal: to observe children in pretend play during the designated activity period. She made certain that children could engage with familiar play areas. She also planned for a new, yet simple, activity that might invite children's exploration: the magnetic letters for making words. When the girls saw the materials as an opportunity for pretend play, Ms. Curtis was right there, ready to listen and document what unfolded.

As classroom leaders, teachers, and childcare providers make decisions nonstop on any typical day, such as extending an activity for a longer time frame, rescheduling an activity for a later day, discontinuing an activity that is not working, or changing the order of activities to fit with how the day is going. Such flexibility – or “reading” of the children and the school day flow – is the cornerstone of teacher involvement in authentic assessment. *Bridging* asks teachers and providers to draw on the same decision-making skills they use in classroom teaching when making decisions about the assessment process.

Being flexible while using *Bridging's* assessment processes is not equivalent to having lax standards or no structure for the assessment process. Instead, *Bridging* gives teachers and providers authority and trusts them to follow best practice principles to guide their thinking and behavior during planning, implementation, and reflection on assessment findings. *Bridging* also assures teachers and providers that they are not stuck with the decisions they make. As with many aspects of daily activity in the classroom, they can adjust and update the plan with a more informed decision if something is not working or making sense. Tracking these decisions helps uncover the steps that make teaching and learning more effective.

## Participant

As with the role of a decision-maker, the teacher and provider's role as an active participant in *Bridging* begins before the assessment starts. Specifically, teachers and childcare providers:

- organize materials for assessment activities; and
- review and understand key concepts and skills in various activities and their developmental progression.

The teacher and provider's role as a participant expands when interacting with children during the *Bridging* assessment process. Teachers and providers address logistical issues such as, "How will I introduce the activity in an inviting, playful way? How will I explain the goal of the activity to children? What concepts or steps in the task will I want to describe in some detail?" These are among the "how to" questions that call for providers' and teachers' decision-making to engage children effectively in the activity.

In the snapshot, Ms. Curtis set the stage for the children to start their school day. She set out cookie trays with magnetic letters to address the learning goal of children becoming familiar with the letters of the alphabet and the letter that starts their name. She was curious about how the children would take up her invitation to explore. She welcomed the girls and invited them to use the materials for the purpose she had in mind – making words. When the girls saw other possibilities for using the letters, Ms. Curtis was fine with that and open to seeing what would happen in their play. Her supportive, nonjudgmental approach to learning more about her children allowed her to observe their pretend play skills.

The children expected and were accustomed to their two teachers moving about the room, observing, encouraging their activity, and intervening to listen more closely if tension was in the air. When Ms. Curtis came close to the girls making birthday cakes, she commented on their activity, saying, "Yum, you have an alphabet cake! Is there a message on your cakes with all those letters making words?" The children

responded to her on their own wavelength – making birthday cakes for their babies. Ms. Curtis was accepting and curious about how the children used the materials and setting.

## Observer

Observation skills are among the most basic and critical skills of effective teachers and providers. They learn to see everything as if they “had eyes in the back of their heads” and to know what is happening in the classroom. *Bridging* recognizes that being a good observer – gathering information about children as individuals and as a group – is not a role reserved for moments of assessment. What a teacher or provider learns about a child from how the child walks into the room and engages with peers is as important as noticing how the child picks up a pencil to draw a picture during the *Bridging* assessment. Likewise, what a teacher or provider learns about the children from last week’s picnic supper with families is also critical to the kinds of insights they will bring to bear on the analysis of *Bridging* assessment results. *Bridging* assessments depends on educators gathering and recording information on an ongoing basis and being able to keep relevant details in mind when interpreting a child’s performance.

Ms. Curtis demonstrated her skill in listening closely in order to understand her children and follow the line of thought they developed. She watched how they responded to her comments without worrying about the gap between her wish to promote word-making and the girls’ wish to make birthday cakes for their babies. The girls’ response was developmentally appropriate, understandable, and even delightful! Ms. Curtis introduced the possibility of making words, and the girls were confident enough in their relationship with their teacher to respond honestly and thoughtfully. Their reaction also was their highest level of thinking in response to their teacher’s invitation to engage in the activity. That was the goal – and their trust in their teacher allowed Ms. Curtis to capture their thinking.

In addition to observing children, the effective provider and teacher also observe the progress of the assessment process inside the day’s curriculum implementation. The teacher or provider notes what is working well regarding logistics with this class of children and what needs to be changed or adjusted as the children progress. For example, the setup for materials, the space chosen for children to participate in an activity, and decisions about groupings of children are among the implementation decisions the teacher or provider makes and adjusts for as the day progresses.

As an observer, the teacher and provider watch and capture what children do when engaged in the *Bridging* assessment activities. This is when educators listen and observe closely to capture as much detail as possible. This is the heart of good assessment skills: observing and recording details without judging the child, but rather capturing the

richness so that it can be studied when the children have left for the day. Guided by the key concepts and skills that the activity invites, the teacher or provider observes children's interaction with materials and performance in each activity. Based on these observations, the teacher or provider scores each child's performance, notes the child's reaction to task components such as social grouping, and records the child's working approaches. The teacher and provider also may note additional information, such as the child's comments or unexpected use of materials.

The primary responsibility of a teacher and provider is to carefully observe how each child responds to specific activity components. This role is especially important during the *Bridging* assessment process in order to gather authentic and accurate data to use when interpreting the child's behavior. A key factor in effectively gathering observational data lies in the teacher and provider's grasp of key concepts, skills, and diverse working approaches alongside recognizing the developmental progression of varied content knowledge.

## Interpreter

As interpreters, teachers and providers make sense of the information they gather about children's performance. In the *Bridging* assessment process, teachers and providers review each child's profiles of performance scores and working approaches. They expect variability. Children respond to each task differently, they have favorites and preferences, and they have days when nothing feels right. In reviewing the data and considering the children's experiences, teachers and providers:

- score each child's performance and working approaches on each activity;
- look for patterns and relationships as well as identify each child's strengths and areas of inexperience or weakness; and
- identify the areas where children have achieved mastery and can work independently. They also pinpoint the skills and concepts children are currently developing and where children need further experience, targeted instruction, and/or time to make more progress.

In *Bridging*, teachers and providers understand the child's activity in a context that considers the characteristics of the task, the nature of the learning the child is doing, and the educator's insights about the child. Teachers and providers consider how different aspects of the assessment activity interact rather than attribute a child's performance to the effects of a single factor.

After Ms. Curtis observed her children's pretend play, she began the process of interpretation by looking at her observation notes related to the activity rubric. She looked first at three key aspects of the children's



play: the children's use of materials, the nature of their talk, and how they related to each other. Next, she reviewed the rubric while considering to what extent the children created and explored a hypothetical situation they invented together using words and objects to represent aspects of the imaginary scene. Ms. Curtis recorded a Level 5 for both children. The two girls found each other as partners to build a story together – and they participated in building a story through emerging interactive play skills.

Ms. Curtis scored both girls as a 4 or 5 on each of the productive working approaches. Both children were eager to come to their chosen activity – they each formulated a goal, maintained their focus, and continued the play as they got further into baking and saw the possibilities with other materials nearby. For the descriptive working approaches, Ms. Curtis noted their chattiness as a central part of what sustained them both in play and exploration. In addition, they shared a narrative fantasy: making birthday cakes. They also worked at a comfortable, deliberate pace in synchrony with each other.

To support the data interpretation process, Table 4.2 provides questions about a child's activity performance and working approaches that teachers and providers can consider asking themselves. Although these questions are separated by category, we recognize that the content

**Table 4.2** Reflection Questions for Interpreting the Assessment Results

Reflecting on a Child's Performance Levels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I notice about the child's rubric scores across the five activities? Do the scores match what I sense this child is good at doing and what the child is drawn to doing?</li> <li>• What comes to mind as I examine this child's performance levels? Does a pattern exist for the child's strengths and areas where the child has yet to develop?</li> <li>• What activity goals, key concepts, and skills does the child understand? What are the strengths grounding this child? What does the child know and do confidently?</li> <li>• What concepts and skills does the child seem to be working on in each curriculum area?</li> <li>• What challenges the child? What seems to engage the child in a way that draws him or her into concentrating on working on a problem?</li> <li>• How does the variability in the child's rubric scores compare to that of other children in the class?</li> <li>• How might factors such as social grouping when working on an activity or activity materials influence the child's effort and performance score?</li> <li>• If the child has participated in this activity before, how does the child's performance compare to previous experiences?</li> </ul>
Reflecting on Working Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the child's working approach consistent across activities?</li> <li>• How do the child's productive working approaches in areas of strength compare with those not as strong?</li> <li>• How do the child's working approaches relate to their performance level?</li> <li>• What does it mean when a child receives high working approach scores for an activity on which the child has a low rubric score?</li> <li>• What does the information on working approaches suggest about how a child becomes productively engaged in school learning activities?</li> </ul>

and process of learning variables do not work in isolation and are also interconnected when we attempt to interpret them. Teachers and providers will likely find themselves referencing both kinds of insight to understand assessment findings.

When reviewing and interpreting the assessment results, a teacher or provider compares the *Bridging* data with their knowledge of the children from observations in ongoing classroom activities because no one source of information provides a complete understanding of a child. Ms. Curtis has documentation on a rich sample of pretend play for the two children that she can refer to as she thinks about their progress in different learning areas. For example, she can compare their base of skills and their approach to engaging in play to what these same children do in counting collections, drawing a self-portrait, and acting out stories. Ms. Curtis is building a profile of what and how her children learn that looks at all children individually along with their ability to engage and grow from being with each other.

Equally important in the process of interpreting assessment findings is discussing findings and observations with other teachers and providers, the school principal or director, the child's parents, and even the child! Teachers, providers, and children have everything to gain as teachers and providers broaden their sources of insight. These insights include the child's performance of various activities and the knowledge of a variety of people who are committed to the child's learning and success in the classroom.

Cultural psychologists Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner urged professionals to view assessment data as possibilities. By possibilities, they meant that assessment information can and ought to be regarded as "hypothesis generators," with data being interpreted from multiple points of view and used "as an opportunity to reexamine what good performance entails" (1974, p. 198). *Bridging* asks teachers and childcare providers to look at assessment results in terms of not only what a child does or does not know at any one moment but also what the child's performance *means* for them. The meaning that can be uncovered in patterns of assessment data becomes the story that the teacher can tell. The story embodies insights gathered from looking at the findings from various points of view. These perspectives include knowledge of individual children and the chemistry of how children learn together in this particular class. They also include the possible influences of task structure, materials, social arrangements, and the content area on a child's performance. Instead of attributing children's performance effects to a single dimension, *Bridging* invites teachers to consider how different dimensions of the assessment process interact constantly.

The meaning of *Bridging* assessment results cannot be set out and described in this book. Results are particular to individual children. Their meaning is relative to a specific educational context and is influenced by a child's family culture and community background. When interpreting the assessment results, teachers and providers will benefit

enormously if they can work with colleagues because a rich interpretation of data takes patience and a willingness to consider various possible meanings and explanations.

## Translator

The teacher and childcare provider's role as translator comes after the assessment activities have been completed. In the *Bridging* assessment process, being a translator involves:

- ▶ using the results to shape curriculum objectives, select materials, and design learning activities;
- ▶ identify points of entry for individual children in particular curriculum areas based on your assessment of what will best unlock their potential.

The translation begins when teachers and providers ask themselves questions, such as, "What are my priorities for learning and teaching given the assessment findings from today? What will I focus on tomorrow and in the upcoming weeks? How can I align my instructional methods with what I learned from the assessment process?"

When looking for entry points for each child to reach new goals, teachers and providers can ask themselves questions, such as, "How can a child's interests become an entry point to a curriculum area where the child has little experience? Which of our *Bridging* tasks this week did children find easy, and which were harder?" The teacher or provider might engage the children in a conversation about what their strengths are, what areas are difficult, and what the child's interests are at school. Such discussions have no right or wrong answers. These conversations only provide more opportunities for group and individual awareness. Information the children provide might help the teacher better understand the assessment results and gain new insights into how to translate them into learning experiences for the children.

Ms. Curtis made a few notes after observing the children's play with the materials she had set out for the activity that reflected the following insights:

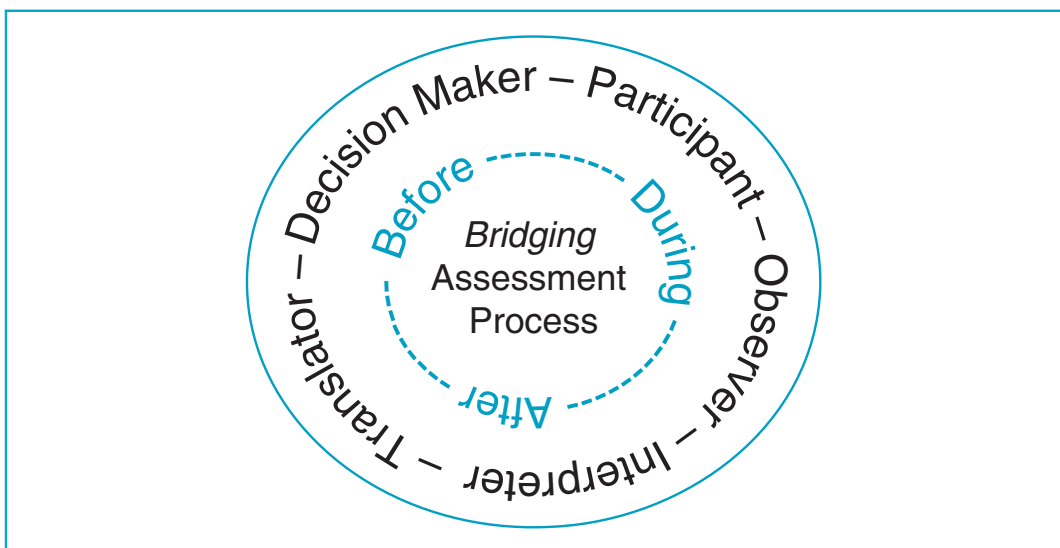
- ▶ The children responded well to the classroom setup which invited small groups of children to interact. Ms. Curtis was mindful of what materials and activities were adjacent and how they were spaced in the classroom.
- ▶ The materials that involved a lot of small pieces were used appropriately and constructively. Since the end of October, Ms. Curtis had been slowly introducing new material each week, explaining how they might be used and how to take good care of them in the classroom.

- Currently, the children's exploration concentrated on the physical properties of materials, which Ms. Curtis believed was a crucial foundation for the later abstract use of these materials. She will continue to observe their material exploration and ensure that it's integrated into the learning process. For instance, she noticed the children watching her incorporate alphabet letters into various activities throughout the school day. By introducing magnetic letters for play, she aims to familiarize the children with a new dimension of using letters in their play and conversations. In the coming months, the alphabet – coupled with the children's vibrant imaginations – will form the cornerstone of their emergent writing and reading development.

Regarding interactions among the children, Ms. Curtis saw that these two girls were confident and assertive in participating in their play activity. They also brought their imagination and wish to connect with others verbally into their play. Ms. Curtis watched for these qualities because they signal a healthy classroom climate for children to test their thinking, experiment with possible ideas, and know they are being heard.

Figure 4.1 depicts the dynamic flow of the five integral roles a teacher and provider assume within the *Bridging* assessment process. It is important to note that while we delineate these teacher and provider roles sequentially – before, during, and after assessment – they remain fluid and adaptable in a real-world application. They flexibly respond to the nuances of assessment activities, individual student engagements, and group dynamics at any given juncture. Teachers and providers frequently embody multiple roles concurrently throughout the *Bridging* assessment

**Figure 4.1** The Dynamic Flow of the Five Teacher/Childcare Provider Roles in *Bridging* Assessment



process. Ultimately, teachers and providers hold the reins in the *Bridging* assessment process by exploring these five pivotal questions:

- ▶ **Decision-maker:** How will I use *Bridging* in my classroom at different points in the school year?
- ▶ **Participant:** What concepts and skills embedded in the *Bridging* activity require my attention when facilitating the assessment and children's learning?
- ▶ **Observer:** What do I notice children doing? What concepts, skills, and working approaches are evident in each child's efforts?
- ▶ **Interpreter:** What do results from each activity and across activities suggest about each child's learning, and the group's progress?
- ▶ **Translator:** How can I use results to further children's learning and development in the upcoming days and weeks?

Our intention in outlining these roles is not to establish rigid boundaries, but rather to illuminate the distinctive facets intrinsic to each dimension of professional teaching. This perspective sheds light on the assessment process, instructional strategizing, and the intricate interplay of these roles within the realm of proficient teaching. At the core of the *Bridging* assessment paradigm lies the empowerment and involvement of teachers and childcare providers.