

BOOK REVIEWS

Windows on Learning: Documenting Young Children's Work

Judy Harris Helm, Sallee Beneke, & Kathy Steinheimer
Teachers College Press, 1998
\$19.95, 203 pages

Reviewed by Sharon K. Alexander

Educators want to be able to see clearly what a child has learned. Most states have standards and benchmarks that schools are required to teach, which are often tied to a school improvement framework. Schools must use the framework to present assessment data that shows students are learning the standards. Besides standardized test scores, how do educators show student growth? Various ideas are given in *Windows on Learning* to meet accountability demands.

In the field of education one of the buzzwords is authentic assessment. Although this term is not accentuated in the title, authentic assessment and documentation go hand in hand. The authors do a very good job of presenting a thorough overview of some documentation techniques. Although the examples focus on an early childhood classroom, they have implications for effectiveness in primary grades as well. This reviewer has implemented many of the techniques in pre-K, kindergarten, first, second, and fifth grade, with much success.

The book is broken into three sections. First the authors discuss what documentation is and why it is important in education. This covers more than half of the text. The web, project narratives, personal observations, portfolios, creating products, and self-reflections are all forms of documentation. Time is taken to describe each technique in detail, supported with real-life examples from the target school. The visuals included are helpful. The authors assert that "through documentation the teacher can make it possible for others to 'see' the learning that takes place when developmentally appropriate teaching occurs" (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998, p. 15).

After establishing the basis for documentation the authors take the reader through the how. It answers such questions as what to photograph? What is the best view? How many times a week does a teacher journal? What are the guidelines of displaying children's work? One of the big questions is how

does one decide what should be documented. Each school must have an outline of what it considers important to teach and that is exactly what should be assessed. “In preparing to document it is important to obtain a copy of the goals and objectives and any curriculum guides. This will not only focus the documentation but also increase teaching effectiveness” (Helm et al., 1998, p. 113).

In the second section, the authors tackle issues that people often use to discredit documentation practices: reliability and bias. Many argue that documentation is not a valid assessment because of these issues. If there is a comprehensive performance-based assessment system in place with checklists completed at regular intervals, a planned system of review, a systematic way of collecting data, and peer review to counter bias, documenting authentic assessment can be meaningful. One case in point is work sampling. Research done by Meisels, Liaw, Dorfman, and Fails (1995), presented in *The Work Sampling System*, has shown that it provides teachers with reliable and valid data about children’s school performance.

The authors acknowledge that documentation of authentic assessment does take more time and effort to implement than paper-and-pencil standardized tests; however, they also highlight the great rewards earned. Some of the most significant benefits come with children’s attitudes on learning and the assessment process.

Perhaps the most powerful effect of documentation is that children gain satisfaction from their own efforts and see the appreciation of those efforts by parents and other adults who are important in their lives. Teachers who document have observed that as they increased the attention given to documentation, children have become more careful about their work and more evaluative. The time and effort that teachers devote to gathering information on children’s work has communicated clearly to the children what they are doing is important. (Helm et al., 1998, p. 149)

Finally, in the third section, the authors take you step by step with an in-depth study of a project at their target school: “Our Mail Project.” It lays out exactly what was done in the project, how learning was assessed by both staff and students, how documentation was displayed, and the review and reflection that took place for future improvement. This section solidified how this technique would look in a classroom.

Windows on Learning was an affirmation of this reviewer’s personal beliefs. Having worked in early childhood as a teacher and director of programs for approximately two decades, the information in this book was not new. For

someone who has little firsthand knowledge of documentation and authentic assessment, this would be a good introductory text. Catholic schools are just beginning to recognize the advantages to having an early childhood program as part of the elementary school. *Windows on Learning* would be beneficial for administrators and staff implementing new early childhood programs because it provides a good knowledge base with concrete examples.

Elementary educators can use documentation as an additional way to communicate student growth, giving one more leg to the assessment stool when working toward accountability. *Windows on Learning* could make a good professional development text if a school is looking to incorporate authentic assessment. One caution would be that the examples cited are in an early childhood classroom, so upper elementary teachers may not feel it is relevant to them. It would be best suited for K-2. Excerpts from the book could also be used to help educate parents on documentation of authentic assessment.

As a day-to-day how-to reference book, it would not be my first choice. The examples contain too much information, which, while helpful, is not always necessary. A book that could be used every day would be more in outline form, with reproducible templates. This text does not offer them, but overall, *Windows on Learning* is a helpful reference.

REFERENCES

- Helm, J., Beneke, S., & Steinheimer, K. (1998). *Windows on learning: Documenting young children's work*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Meisels, S., Liaw, F., Dorfman, A., & Fails, R. (1995). The Work Sampling System: Reliability and validity of a performance assessment for young children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 10(3), 277-296.

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Teach With Your Strengths: How Great Teachers Inspire Their Students

Rosanne Liesveld & Jo Ann Miller
Gallup Press, 2005
\$24.95, 205 Pages

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