

# Planned Assessment Opportunities – Early Years

**By Roisin Philip**

Assessment is an essential part of Early Years practice, through both adult-led learning and child-initiated learning. Centring your practice on the continual observe, assess, plan model is key to drawing out information about your pupils' existing knowledge, skills and levels of understanding. This in turn is vital to enable you to respond and know where to take their learning next. Planning in intentional assessment opportunities is particularly useful to minimise your own cognitive load in the moment. This is really important, bearing in mind studies have shown an average teacher makes at least 4 educational decisions every minute. Taking the time to plan for assessment opportunities allows you to pre-consider what I think of as the 'if... then...' to move learning forward: **if** I can see that a child knows or can do a certain thing, what will I **then** move them on to or how will I pose questions to deepen the thinking, for example.

For these examples of planned assessment opportunities, I'm going to think specifically about the skill of subitising, and how I would plan to assess children's ability to recognise a quantity of up to 5 objects without counting both in adult-led and child-initiated learning time.

## **Planned Assessment in adult-led or guided learning**

A key opportunity for assessment is to assess prior knowledge and understanding at the beginning of an adult-directed maths lesson. I often use this time to activate some prior learning as a recap or an opportunity for spaced retrieval practice. It is helpful to consider the foundational maths skills children will be drawing upon in their new learning. It can be helpful to give some speedy example and non-examples to elicit understanding of a concept, or to give a partially completed example which the pupils then complete, or a 'find the error' example to draw out children's understanding of mathematical processes or their own reasoning around a concept.

In beginning an adult led session focussed on the objective of being able to subitise a total of up to 5, I might start with a simple 'Who has more or how many?' visual task.

I might show photos of children with different die spot amounts as a flashcard comparison task, or start with an activity with different children holding cards.

To assess if any of the children are beginning to subitise, I would then ask the children to show the total using 'finger throw'. Here I'd observe if the children 'grow' or 'show' the total: for example: they may grow the number 4... or they may 'show' it like this with the automaticity which would demonstrate they are already able to subitise in this context. It could also illuminate if some children are not yet able to accurately count the total, and therefore not ready to move on to learning this skill. Hands down questioning is really helpful here to spotlight on key children.

From a simple starter like this, I can judge whether moving on to subitising is appropriate for the children in the group, or whether they need further support to grasp the concept of more or less and accurate counting or cardinality. I can also decide whether to focus on subitising to 3 as I move the learning on (using 1-3 dice and other resources), up to 5, or whether to extend further (introducing 1-6 dice for example). Through targeted questioning, I might find perhaps some children are ready to be challenged to think about conceptual subitising as they have a secure grasp of perceptual subitising- which I will note to ensure that I can provide appropriate challenge during smaller group work and through enhanced provision for child-initiated learning. I find the simplest and most efficient way to record this sort of assessment is to directly annotate on to my planning. I can then immediately note any amendments I need to make. My planning is most certainly a 'working document'!

Another opportunity to plan in some purposeful assessment is to consciously check for misconceptions forming in pupil knowledge as you are assessing children's understanding and pinpointing any gaps in their knowledge and skills. The longer I've been teaching the more familiar I've become with the common misconceptions that can form in each area of learning, but children can and will continually surprise you, and it is valuable to chat with colleagues to share ideas about what misconceptions could arise. I like to plan to check for potential misconceptions at two points during an adult-led session:

1. As I am about to start pupils with their independent or guided task. Where I know there is a good chance of a common misconception arising, I will give the children a question to answer which contains the misconception. It is only a quick check, but it helps me get a sense of whether the class is ready to try the independent work or which pupils would benefit from more support.
2. And then again during the independent/ guided task – I will move around the group of children and target my questioning to a) assess their understanding and b) and look for misconceptions to correct instantly. This may be through 1:1 feedback to a child, or it may involve me stopping the group to re-teach or re-model if I spot a misconception forming for several of the children.

Examples of key misconception points I'd be focusing on when teaching children to subitise would be:

- Are children recognising the quantity through the familiar repetition (e.g. on die/domino/numicon shape/simple pictorial representation or are they in fact counting, relying on their 1:1 correspondence counting skills?
- Are the children correctly subitising only when the cardinal value is equal to their own age? Young children have powerful visual memories and some find it easier to remember images than words: children in the Early Years often demonstrate attachment to the number corresponding with their age. Three-year-olds can recognise three things, although they may not say the word. In assessing pupils, I would want to ensure that a child was not simply relying on a mental image of 4 because they were that age, but that they were in fact able to subitise other small numbers. This is what will help children to build images for numbers, to visualise and learn number facts, and to understand the cardinal value or 'howmanyness' of the number.

### **Planned Assessment in child-led learning**

The learning I observe in my adult-led sessions is key to my ongoing assessment and planning for the children's next steps, however it is only one part of the puzzle to build up an accurate picture of the child's learning journey. A true measure of mastery can be seen when a child can independently apply their knowledge and demonstrate their understanding in their self-directed learning. To enable my assessment of children across the provision, the learning environment is carefully evaluated and planned to provide opportunities which reflect the pupils' interests, their strengths and next steps in their learning and development. To this end, I would also plan to capture 'wow' moments which show key progress for a pupil as they interact with resources across the provision. To focus my own attention, particularly for children if I am unsure of how securely they have understood a concept, or for children I may have concerns about, it can also help to identify key children to interact with and carefully observe in their child-initiated learning time.

Evidence captured of observations may include:

- Observed play using die, in which a child instantly recognises the total spots on the die they've rolled and jumps to the corresponding amount on the outdoor snakes and ladders board (where previously I've noticed them counting each spot on the die each turn)
- A child immediately recognising that there are not enough apples for all three children at the snack table, without counting the pieces of fruit
- A video of a recorded conversation between me and a child in which they have been comparing these dot pattern images and have recognised the total of 5 automatically despite the more abstract representations. The recording, and any observation notes, could capture how the child has shown, through their own reasoning, an awareness of the subgroups within 5. The child may have commented on their part-whole visualisation: for example, the first one looks like 5 on the dice but in the second one there are two dots on the top and three at the bottom which makes 5.

This evidence is only recorded when it is necessary. My knowledge of the children and my annotated planning to capture assessment and any work children have completed build a broad sense of the child's strengths and areas to further develop. Where assessment is captured, however, I am then able to look back at this evidence at a later date with children and with their parents, allowing for children to reflect on their own learning which can often further support my assessment of their knowledge, skills and understanding as well as strengthening the children's self-regulation and metacognition skills.