Assessing the Assessment

Throughout my experience with the Augustana-Longfellow Number Sense Project I have been exposed to and proctored the standardized tests that each student in the Kindergarten classrooms are asked to complete multiple times throughout the year. The assessment that was being used was a multiple choice test that was taken on the iPad where students would need to ‘tap’ the correct answer to the automatically read questions. Before the students had to take the official version of this assessment for their quarterly report cards, my fellow teacher candidates and I gave a paper pencil practice version of the same test to the students. During this time I personally worked with the students who were not able to recognize and were unable write numeral less than twenty, struggled with one to one correspondence, could not identify their shapes, and had not started working on addition and subtraction; in addition to the best of my knowledge at least six of the students in this group are classified as English Language Learners or ELL students; only one teacher provided me with a list of the ELL students. For the sake of limited time I pulled groups of two or three students at a time to complete this assessment. I was given a script that I was asked to repeat to each student as they progressed through the assessment. There were limited directions as well as assistance given to the student from the scripted directions. For Example of the limited directions, while giving the assessment there were several things that jumped out to me as strange both on the assessment level and student level. First, there were some students who flew through the assessment by not taking the time to read the options; the students would not wait for me to finish verbally reading the questions but would picked an answer without knowing the choices were. While others struggled to understand how they needed to select their answer. Secondly, the major things that I found unexpected with the assessment were a question that asked the student to identify the shape of the top of a simply
drawn house. The assessment requested that that student circle the word that described the shape (triangle). Most of the students that I assessed were able to verbally tell me that the shape was a triangle with complete certainty, but when it came to select the word to the right that described the shape, only a few were successful. Lastly, I assessed some of the same students that I had previously worked with during Fall Term, and their end scores did not match their performance while working with me. This made me start thinking about the validity and reliability of this assessment. Validity is defined as the degree of which the evidence supports the data collected about the students (Popham). That is where I found the desire and passion to dive deeper into the world assessment specifically at the kindergarten level. Was there a way to assess these young students to create a more accurate representation of their personal understanding rather than standardized tests?

Learning stories have been identified as an effective model of early childhood assessment. In Carr’s book, Assessment in Early Childhood Settings, Carr discusses the process and benefits of using the assessment tool of learning stories in the early grade. Learning stories “require” researchers to observe children and write narrative ‘stories’ to interpret the learning that is occurring in particular situations” (Carr). Carr goes on to say that learning stories are growing collection of qualitative pictures of each students individual performance. Carr explains that learning stories need to provide the information of a student’s ability and skills in the ‘five target domains of learning’ to give the instructors aid in assessment. The domains are defined as “taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, expressing an idea or a feeling, and taking responsibility or taking another point of view” (96). These domains are thought of as a continuum, one leading into the other, rather than unconnected events. Students are thought to progress through these domains in the order listed above. Carr also suggested that
student’s visible progress is about to be seen in three ways; stories become stronger, then wider, then more complex (Blaiklock). In the literature, Carr and Blaiklock, it was stated that the idea of learning stories can be implemented among any age group of students. Learning stories have a focus on the student personally growing in different aspect of their life, rather than simply answering the test questions correctly.

With each assessment tool used in a classroom comes the questions of ‘is the assessment reliable and or valid”? Carr suggested four ways to help schools reach accountability when using learning stories for assessment purposes. Those suggested ways are, “(1) keeping the data transparent by providing observation information, (2) ensure that a range of interpreters have their say, (3) refining the constructs as they appear locally, (4) be clear about the connection between the learner and the environment” (Carr). With those four previously stated requirements to have accountability within the learning stories, there are some issues that have arisen and been documented by others in the educational field. According to Blaiklock there is an issue with each of the four previously stated ways Carr has suggested to obtain the accountability for Learning Stories. First with “keeping the data transparent, there are many places for errors or skewed representations of what occurred to happen. For example there is not one form that is standard for learning stories as there is for other observational assessments, such as ‘running records”. This leads to different people and educators observing the same experience, but possibly recording the event differently. There are also no guidelines as to how often the stories need to be recorded for each child. Blaiklock also suggested that some teachers are completing these stories while working with other students or waiting until the end of the day; both of which can lead to altered stories.
Secondly, ensuring that a range of interpreters have their say means that multiple staff members are working with the same student and observing similar stories/events. Then after multiple staff members have crafted their stories they sit down to discuss what should be the next step for this individual student. By having these conversations the recorders of the stories are able to discuss what they saw and see if someone else can confirm their understanding of the student’s ability or shed a different light on the observation. These conversations can and should include the parents and possible the student. The limitations of including the parents is due to their personal connection with the student, their child, they may be hesitant to accept or agree to the interpretations that have been recorded in the learning stories. In some schools the thought and ability to have multiple people continuously observing students may not be feasible due to multiple circumstances such as limited staff. Then the learning stories would not have the diverse amount of perspectives, which may lead to a lower accountability and reliability.

Thirdly, refining the constructs as they appear locally goes hand in hand with the previously stated aspect above. This element requires the staff members to meet and consolidate their understandings into one cohesive idea for each student that they all agree upon. Also, the staff need to decide if the student’s understandings and actions are based on a generally understanding that can be applied in other situations or if the student’s actions are just a result of that particular situation. This component is a major player in the question of this assessment tools reliability. If an aspect of the student is recorded in one specific situation, the teacher needs to be able to decipher if the student has that general understanding.

Lastly, being clear about the connection between the learner and the environment is accounting for the physical and social surroundings that are occurring due the time the learning story event is being observed. The environment can be a factor either aiding or hindering the
students performance in ways such as distractions or a new environment that they are not used to. At the end of his article, Ken Blaiklock states that there are some added reasons as to success learning stories have in the classroom. Some of his concerns are those that have been stated above in regards to the lack of reliability and validity, and the lack of guidance and structure that is included in the process.

After reading Blaiklock critiques for the assessment strategy of learning stories, I found related work of Learning Stories article titled “A Proposal to change from Learning Stories to Learning Notes” by Blaiklock. Learning notes include “a description of an event and optional sections that interpret the learning that occurred and suggest ideas for further learning” (Blaiklock). Learning notes, according to Blaiklock, can be used for both informative and summative assessments due to the shortened structure compared to learning stories, they can be produced more frequently. The main difference between learning stories and learning notes is that learning notes describe the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of the students rather than the dispositions. There are three components that make up the learning notes which include, ‘describe’, ‘interpret’, and ‘what’s next?’’. The describe portion includes a short depiction as to what the student was doing in a specific learning experience; the length may vary from a few sentence to a paragraph. This portion of the learning note is expected to be completed at the time of the observation or shortly after. Blaiklock gives some suggestions as to what should be included in this section; student’s name, time and place of event, other people involved, knowledge, skill or attitude demonstrated (6). The teacher or observer should try and limit the amount of interpretation that is included at this point to focus on what is occurring and accurately recording the event.
As for the next two sections there is less of an emphasis of importance on their completion and can be optional to be completed. The interpret section can be used to “highlight the significance” that the student showed (Blaiklock 6). Also the what’s next section can be optional where the teacher or recorder can jot down ideas for future experiences that can build on what was observed.

The two previously discussed assessment tools, learning stories and notes, are not what is quite different than what is occurring in the Kindergarten classrooms at Longfellow Elementary. What is seen is standardized tests that each student completes year in and year out multiple times a year. One form of standardized testing that I did come across in my research was curriculum-based measurement. This idea is defined as instruments that are designed to assess the progress of students in the areas of basic skills, reading, early literacy, mathematics, early numeracy, and written expression (Shinn 783). The distinct features of curriculum-based measurement or CBM are,

“short, usually 5-10 minutes, authentic, emphasizing production-type responses, easy to administer and score, psychometrically sound..., sensitive to differences among individuals or within individuals over time, and administered frequently over time to judge individual student growth” (Shinn 783).

When using CBM’s it is suggested that each skill is quickly assessed after it has been taught. CBMs are used to assess students from the lower grades throughout high school. One of the foundations of this type of assessment is the emphasis that is placed on the attention to intervention/instruction of individuals student over the whole group. Also this form of CBM assessment results are used to determine “students’ level of risk related to meeting benchmark goals” (Lembke 4). Included under the umbrella of CBM is entity of progress monitoring. This
consists of teachers giving multiple forms of assessments on a frequent basis, score the assessment tools, then organize the data into a graph or chart to monitor individuals; as well as to aid in decision-making.

In Lembke’s, Curriculum-Based Measurement in Mathematics: an evidence based formative assessment procedure, article the author addressed the idea of mathematic probes to monitor students from elementary to high school grade levels. The measures or ‘probes’ do not definitely connect and align with the district or state standards, but able to be used by any student in any district. CBMs, according to Lembke, do not give data about the student’s progress on which standards are specifically being met. “CBM can be used as a tool to monitor the effects of enrichment being provided to high achieving students, pre-referral interventions, and (as one measure) the progress of student subgroups toward adequate yearly progress” (Lembke 11).

Across the vast amounts of research, there seems to be a common theme; there may be alternative assessment forms for students in kindergarten. With that being said, there are different views as to how teachers should assess these students. A main theme is the alternate forms of assessment include short observations that should be continuously occurring throughout the day and school year. There is some debate as to how long the observations should be, as well as the frequency they should occur, but it is agreed upon that there should be multiple people observing students in their learning. Also once an observation is made, the teacher as well as other should meet to discuss the reasonings and what should happen next for that individual student. CBM’s are said to occur directly after that skill or information is taught, while learning notes and stories are observing throughout the learning process. There are some major differences between learning stories and learning notes. Learning notes are an improvement on
the idea of learning stories, and bring along more structure and specific directions as to how often they should be collected.

Based on my experience, I have wondered about the kinds of assessment information that can and cannot be detected through standardized tests, and the extent to which learning stories or learning notes can compensate for the shortcoming of standardized tests. For my first recommendations for practice, I wanted to replicate the problem that I saw with the standardized tests. Once I replicate the problem I look to see if the learning stories can help close between what the assessment showed and what the students actually understand.

The first question from the Acuity standardized assessment that I looked at was a geometry based question. The questions showed students a basic drawing of a house with a triangle roof, square wall, and rectangle door. Students were asked verbally by the proctor what is the shape of the roof, and to select the word to the left that corresponded to the shape. Students were able to verbally tell me that the shape was a triangle, but they could not find the word ‘triangle’. In my restructured version of this question, while working one-on-one with students, I gave each of them a white board. Each student was verbally asked to draw a triangle, square, and circle in random order. Them once the student had drawn the shapes I asked what the differences were between each of the shapes. The student were able to tell be that the square had more sides, a triangle had three sides, along with other comments. Then we erased the shapes and I wrote

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1 Leesa: What is the difference between the triangle and the square?  
Marcos: The triangle has three sides and this one has four sides (points to square).  
Leesa: Awesome. What about the difference between the circle and the triangle?  
Marcos: The circle has no sides and the triangle does.  
Leesa: What if I draw a rectangle, what’s the difference between the rectangle and the square?  
Marcos: They are the same.  
Leesa: They are the same?  
Marcos: Yeah, they both have on the sides.
the words of the three shapes the student had just drawn. Once I turned the board around I asked
the students in random order to point to one of the shape names ask I called them out. Only one
student from another group was able to correctly select each shape name correctly, but the others
could draw the shapes correctly. During these observations and replicated activities, I took a
video of each student. From these videos I was able to go back and see who was able to draw the
shapes and makes notes on their performance. From the video and notes of the students, I was
able to gain a better understanding of what the students where able to demonstrate and
comprehend compared to the confusion that was conveyed by the standardized assessments.

The second question from the Acuity standardized assessment that I looked at and tried to
approach in a different fashion was a question that had to deal with counting on. The picture
showed the student seven drawn flowers. The question stated that John had seven flowers, and
asked how many flowers he would have if he planted one more flower. Many of the students
simply counted the visual representations in front of them and selected that as their answer. The
students have been exposed to the idea of counting what is in front of them from the practice test
as well as class work, that the thought of having to count something they could not see did not
cross their mind. In my recreation of the question while working with the students I used
manipulatives that looked like little people and made the topic more relatable. The new topic of
the question was students moving in and out of a class. The students have had first hand
experience of students moving in and out of the classroom, but there may have been students
who had not be exposed to the idea of planting which could be a factor in the misunderstanding
of the question. The first step was to have the students complete the same problem from the

Leesa: Do they look the same?
Marcos: No
Leesa: What’s the differences?
Marcos: One is like this (motions longer with his hands), and the other is like that, like a box.
acuity. I drew four flowers on a white board and asked students to count the number of flowers. Then I verbally asked the students to tell me how many I would have if I planted one more flower. \(^2\) Then I changed the manipulatives to the people and the wording to students moving in and out of a class. When the wording and subject matter was changed, along with the option to move the manipulatives, the students were more successful in answering the question. With seeing these students correctly answer the questions they got wrong on the standardized assessment, I realized that the data from those assessments were skewed.

After a few weeks of working on different skills and math concepts, it was time for the students to take the final Acuity assessment of the year. Once again this assessment would be proctored by a staff member while on the iPad. The staff member who was sitting with the students would not be able to read the questions to the students, but press the automated reading button. For the final assessment the two other teacher candidates and myself were asked to sit with the students to make sure they correctly completed the assessment. The three of us completed learning notes during the assessment for the purpose of the research. \(^3\) Some of the comments from the learning notes should evidence that the student did not necessarily do the problem wrong or not understand the question, but completed the question in a different manner. For example one student selected the largest quantity of pigs when asked to select the group that had nine pigs. Due to the learning note that was completed while the student was taking the assessment, the teacher would understand that the student may understand how to count manipulatives, but simply misunderstood what was being asked through the automated question.

\(^2\) Leesa: Let’s say that I planted these four flowers, ok? How many would I have if I planted one more flower?

Christina: um... (points to the empty space on the white board next to the flowers) One more.

Leesa: How many would I have?

Christina: (counts the drawn flowers) Four.

\(^3\) These specific learning notes did not get turned into the classroom teachers. Also the learning note examples the follow are from students of all skill levels.
Another student verbally told the teacher candidate that the answer to the question was nine objects in all, but then selected the number sentence four minus five.

After having the opportunity to complete a new version of the Acuity assessment that was testing new skills, I was able to see how Learning Notes if and how learning notes would work in a typical classroom setting. After talking with my fellow teacher candidates who proctored and completed learning notes with me, I was able to come to my conclusion. Learning Notes are possible in the classroom, especially when proctoring a standardized assessment individually. By having the learning note while looking at the results from the standardized assessment, a teacher can see where mistakes were made and the possible link to the confusion. By having a record of what the student verbally said or did may lead to a different understanding on the score of the student’s assessment. From my personal completion of the Learning Notes with this standardized assessment I was able to see the importance and significant need for these notes to be accompanied with each proctored assessment. Standardized assessments leave room for error and misrepresentation of a student’s abilities; that is where Learning Notes are able to come in and fill the gaps.

From my research and work within the two Kindergarten classrooms at Longfellow, I have seen where and how these Learning Notes can be implemented. By having a short written record of what was said, demonstrated, and completed there is room for a teacher to understand where a student is coming from and make decisions based on that individual student’s actions. Assessing a student’s understanding can be hard, especially at such a young age. After my work and research on the topic of assessing young students, I have concluded that when trying to assess the understanding and ability of a student there needs to be notes taken about what occurred during the students time in the classroom. There are so many factors that can alter a
student’s score on a standardized or paper pencil assessment, but with the use of learning notes the student’s actions speak volumes. As well as provide information for the teacher that a standardized assessment cannot provide from it’s one dimensional score. Learning Notes allow for each student to show their understanding and receive instruction that will push their knowledge to the next level. With the implementation of Learning Notes specifically in conjunction to the acuity assessment, I believe scores and thoughts of student’s abilities will drastically change.