Assessment in early primary education

An empirical study of five school contexts

Article Summary
Within the current standards-based framework of early primary education, teachers must negotiate the integration of assessment with traditional, developmental orientations to teaching and learning. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine teachers’ approaches to early primary assessment within five different school contexts: public, independent, Froebel, Waldorf, and Montessori. Data were collected from 12 kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers through in-depth interviews followed by ethnographic observations of eight classrooms. Data were thematically analyzed to identify core approaches to assessment across the contexts related to the following themes: (1) diverse conceptions of assessment, (2) commitments to student-oriented assessment, (3) knowing children through a practice of observation, and (4) assessment of academic standards. Underpinning these assessment themes was the fundamental commitment of early-primary educators to whole-child teaching and assessment. The article concludes with suggestions for future research that explore the intersection between teaching and assessment in play-based pedagogical contexts, alternative educational approaches, and systems of high accountability, with the aim of supporting teachers in bridging developmental and academic priorities in the early primary grades.

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