

Preface

Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky once compared the work of educators to that of farmers. Good farmers do not judge the plants under their care only on the basis of the harvest. They are aware of the stages that lead to the appearance of the fruit, monitor crops for signs of those milestones throughout the growing season, and make adjustments in their work of watering or fertilizing crops as needed to sustain growth. Similarly, effective teachers do not plan learning experiences based solely on what has already happened in the classroom; they observe the present with an eye toward the future. They can describe, at any moment in time, what concepts and skills the child is working on, why such development is important, where the child is likely to go in the near future, and what support is likely to further the child's growth.

Bridging: Assessment for Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms, PreK–3 is an assessment and curriculum tool designed to help teachers do the work of good farmers. This includes helping teachers to:

- Make sense of the children's learning and development they notice on any one day;
- Understand where the children's developmental achievements have come from;
- Foresee where children's development is likely to go in upcoming weeks and months; and
- Recognize what they can do to create the conditions that will make development likely.

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE OF THIS BOOK?

Bridging is written for preservice and inservice teachers of children three to eight years of age, and for early childhood teacher educators. It assists new teachers preparing to enter the field, as well as those currently working in classrooms with young children, to understand the challenges and responsibilities behind having a good day in school with young children. It engages teachers in a classroom assessment process that helps them understand what children know and can do as well as how they learn. While doing so, it also helps teachers gain more in-depth understanding of the content knowledge present in the activities children are engaged in as well as further their insights into individual children in their class. Such careful observation provides the foundation for fine-tuning teaching to better serve the needs of diverse young children, insuring quality education in early childhood classrooms.

Is this a book about a new way to test young children?

No, this is not a book about testing; it is a book that supports teachers growing skilled in observing and analyzing children's learning while it is happening in familiar classroom activities. Take a look at Table 1.1 on page 7—Bridging Assessment and Curriculum Areas and Activities—and read through the description of the 15 activities. Reading books, acting out dictated stories, singing songs, and working with pattern blocks are old friends of most early childhood teachers. *Bridging* turns these familiar classroom activities into a tool that guides teachers in understanding and appreciating the significance in each small step of development in core curricular areas between the ages of three and eight. We call this process assessment, but the child is "assessed" in a playful, engaging classroom situation. Insights gained from the assessment process support teachers in providing the conditions for more effective teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Can this tool help early childhood teachers meet the demand of accountability?

Yes. Accountability is currently the most serious and pressing issue at all levels of the education system, from preschool through university. Teachers of young children are asked to show how well students are doing in relation to goals and standards. As an assessment system, *Bridging* goes a step further: it provides information on what young children know, but in a context and format that give teachers the ability to adjust their instructional approach to improve children's learning. Improved teaching and learning is the putative goal of all accountability efforts; *Bridging* is designed to ensure that early childhood teachers have a way to reach that goal.

How do early childhood teachers use *Bridging* to improve teaching and learning experiences in classrooms?

Teachers can use *Bridging* on their own, but it also holds great potential when used by teachers working together on an ongoing basis. The *Bridging* assessment activities provide an opportunity to discuss literacy, the arts, mathematics, and the various sciences and how knowledge develops in these subject areas in young children's lives. Integrating this knowledge with a careful analysis of children's learning enables teachers to provide solid curriculum appropriate to the needs of the children. Further, the insights gathered through the *Bridging* assessment process provide teachers with a language for articulating to professionals, colleagues, and parents what is happening in classrooms where there is joy, passion, commitment to learning, and intellectual challenge.

The work presented in this book is the result of seven years of research and fieldwork. We have been classroom teachers and teacher educators for most of our lives. We write this book as if we were in the classroom working with a group of children from diverse educational, family, and cultural backgrounds. The work of teaching young children is complex and challenging. The *Bridging* process models the thinking of skilled teachers who strive to understand children's learning needs and adjust learning opportunities to meet their needs. We hope that *Bridging* contributes to early childhood teachers' confidence in knowing how and why children are having a good day in school!