



Peer-reviewed paper

Assessment practices within New Zealand early childhood settings

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In recent years, the main form of assessment being used in early childhood education is formative assessment. Often referred to as 'assessment for learning,' formative assessment assesses children within the context of their everyday learning experiences, and understandings gained are used as the basis for future teaching and learning (Broadfoot, 2007; Hargreaves, 2007). In early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa/New Zealand, meaningful assessment may be happening when teachers assess children's significant learning experiences and develop possible future learning experiences with children, parents, families/*whānau* and other teachers.

Prior to the widespread use of formative assessment in ECE, the sector had often used summative forms of assessment in the form of checklists, which focused on identifying gaps in children's learning and development. Based on deficits identified in checklists, teaching strategies were developed, aiming to fill the gaps in children's knowledge and learning (Carr, 2001). Podmore and Carr (1999) argued that the sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* meant that these assessment practices needed to change to align with the principles and strands outlined in the credit based curriculum.

Although there is no prescribed form of assessment within ECE settings, the sector generally now employs narrative forms of assessment, often in the form of learning stories (Education Review Office, 2013). The Education Review Office (2007, 2013) has supported the widespread use of learning stories, and substantial government funding went into providing resources and professional development to support the implementation of learning stories (Blaklock, 2010). Although many authors have praised the learning story framework (Dunn, 2004; Feltham, 2005; Hatherly & Sands, 2002; Mitchell & New Zealand Council for Educational, 2008; Nyland & Alfayez, 2012; Reisman, 2011), not all are convinced of the effectiveness of learning stories; Blaklock (2008, 2010), for example, voices concerns about this assessment framework.

This article will outline the preliminary findings of a research project investigating teachers' understandings and enactment of assessment. Emphasis will be placed on the practical ways teachers are supporting and encouraging all members of the learning community (children, parents, families/*whānau*) to be involved in assessment for learning.



Learning stories

During the development of *Te Whāriki*, Helen May and Margaret Carr identified the need for future guidelines on assessment to be created (Te One, 2003). In 1995, Carr led the Ministry of Education funded project for assessing children's experiences in early childhood settings. However, it was not until 2001 that Carr and Wendy Lee were contracted to develop assessment exemplars (Davis, 2006). This resulted in the publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004a) and professional development to support the implementation of the exemplars that followed. The learning story framework, originating from the work of Carr, provided a framework for assessment consistent with the principles, strands and sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* (Keesing-Styles & Hedges, 2007).

Learning stories are structured written narratives of significant learning moments, highlighting children's strengths, interests, abilities and dispositions (Cowie & Carr, 2004; Dunn, 2004). These credit based assessments assess children in the context of everyday experiences, paying attention to learning dispositions, and ideally involve multiple perspectives (Carr, 2001). A key aim of learning stories is to show children as confident, competent learners and reflect reciprocal, responsive relationships that happen on a daily basis in a range of contexts (Cowie & Carr, 2004). In this way, the learning story framework is closely aligned to the founding aspiration of *Te Whāriki* "for children to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Each ECE setting is encouraged to develop its own unique style and way of recording learning stories. Whilst there is no one 'right' way, stories generally aim to reflect the values and beliefs of the particular learning community. *Kei Tua o Te Pae* discusses a process of noticing, recognising and responding, which is often used to assess children's learning in ECE settings (Ministry of Education, 2004a). In basic terms, this involves teachers noticing what children are involved in, recognising some of the learning, and responding to what they recognise. Collaborating with the learning community (children, parents, families/*whānau*, and other teachers) is valued, and learning stories aim to include multiple perspectives (Feltham, 2005). As the learning community discusses and makes decisions about children's learning, teachers give attention to and aim to highlight key learning dispositions (Carr, 2001).

Unlike more traditional forms of assessment, the learning story framework views teachers as active participants. Learning stories are often written in the first person, placing the teachers within the story, which helps to recognise and acknowledge teachers' views (Feltham, 2005). Writing stories in the first person means teachers' understandings and interactions between children and teachers become central to assessments. This was an important shift, as teachers were no longer seen as standing outside the learning process and imparting knowledge (Hill, 2011); rather, children and teachers were viewed as co-constructing knowledge together (Carr, 2001). Learning stories written by a teacher who knows the child well became used as a catalyst for discussions about learning with other members of the learning community - children, parents, family/*whānau* and other teachers (Carr, 2001).



A common way teachers began to incorporate the perspectives of children and parents was through a separate section within the learning story often called a 'child's voice' and 'parent's voice' (Carr, 2001). Although the way teachers incorporate the child's and parent's voice has changed over the years, value continues to be placed on including multiple perspectives.

Each teacher finds their own way to assess children's learning. Teachers develop ways to assess children's learning based on what works for them and their setting. Although there are basic guidelines set out within the regulatory framework (Ministry of Education, 2008; New Zealand Government, 2008) each teacher and setting assesses and documents children's learning differently. Some teachers follow a format that may have been passed down from management, and have quite clear parameters around what should be included in the story. Other teachers are more individualised in their story writing and formatting, and one story may look quite different to the next.

Experiences with assessment – a personal narrative

As a beginning teacher, I became increasingly interested in assessing children's learning and planning to support learning. I went through initial teacher education at a time when the early childhood sector was just beginning to shift from summative forms of assessment, such as checklists and running records, to formative forms of assessment, in particular, learning stories.

When I began my first teaching job, I was surprised to see checklists were the main form of assessment still being used in the ECE sector at the time. Checklists were based on developmental norms and, twice a year within the centre I worked at, teachers completed a checklist for each child enrolled at the centre. After completing a checklist, we would develop learning objectives based on *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to support children's achievement within areas they *needed* further support in. Within this deficit discourse, the focus was on identifying what children could not yet do and supporting them to be able to achieve in these areas (Carr, 2001). It seemed to me that a deficit assessment discourse did not fit very well with *Te Whāriki*, a 'strength based' curriculum. I had been introduced to the learning story, strength based framework as part of my studies and questioned why the centre was not using learning stories. However, as a beginning teacher, ultimately I continued to follow the centre practices at the time.

When the professional development courses began in 2005 to support the implementation of *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004b), along with my centre manager, I jumped at the chance to take part. Although I was excited to begin using learning stories, I was challenged by the shift in assessment thinking presented by *Kei Tua o te Pae* and remember struggling with how to assess children's learning using a 'strengths based' model. I often found myself writing positive stories about children's learning experiences and identifying key learning. Nonetheless, when it came to the next steps for learning, I seemed to fall back into a deficit view, focusing on what children could not yet do. Speaking with colleagues about this, I discovered that I was not alone, and other teachers were struggling to make the shift in thinking and practice. This was also highlighted in



many studies at the time investigating assessment; for example, Davis (2006), Schurr (2009) and Turnock (2009) all discussed some of the ways teachers struggled to make the shift. Similar to my experiences, Turnock (2009) found that teachers in their study were noticing and recognising children's strengths, interests and abilities, but when it came to planning future learning pathways, teachers often focused on the deficit. This intrigued me and I began to wonder why so many of my colleagues and I were struggling to shift our assessment practice. Over time, I have considered this further and began to ask: what are some of the issues and tensions teachers were grappling with, in terms of assessment?

Formative assessment for learning within early childhood is still relatively new, and changes and developments to challenge my thinking are happening all the time. After working with the learning story framework as a teacher, centre manager and now supporting beginning teachers, I still have questions. Even though I have participated in the professional development programmes supporting *Kei Tua o te Pae* three times, I still feel uneasy about my knowledge. I feel my knowledge and understanding of assessment is consistently on the move, as I explore assessment more and read about others' perspectives.

From my personal experience, there appears to be anecdotal evidence that suggests there are numerous factors influencing assessment practices. Some key factors that influence the implementation of assessment practices within an ECE context are:

- Demands on teachers' time. It can be challenging for teachers to 'fit' assessment into the day. Teachers within ECE usually have some form of scheduled non-contact time. However, the frequency and amount of time off the floor to complete assessments varies from setting to setting.
- Timing and frequency of assessment. Evidence suggests that it is common practice for teachers to complete one assessment (generally a learning story) for each child per month (Blaiklock, 2008). This was the case when I was teaching, and I remember getting near the end of the month and writing a learning story for a child because I had to; often what I had written may not have been particularly significant for the child.
- Variable knowledge and guidance. Although there are a number of resources available to support teachers' assessment practices, such as *Kei Tua o te Pae*, some teachers and settings struggle to access support and guidance (Ministry of Education, 2004b). Initially, professional development programmes supported the implementation of *Kei Tua o te Pae* from 2005 - 2009; however, not all centres and teachers had access to this. Teachers entering the field of ECE after this time are often relying on the knowledge and skills of other teachers within the setting to support their assessment practices.
- According to McLachlan (2011), changes to funding rates also mean that there may be a lack of qualified teachers in some settings. Teachers who are not qualified and potentially have little knowledge about curriculum, assessment and planning may be asked to write learning stories. Qualified teachers may be asked to write more stories, putting more pressure on these teachers.



Whilst my interest in assessment for learning has grown and developed over the years, it continues to feel partial and ever changing. I have experienced assessment practices in a number of capacities and continue to be passionate about the everyday ways teachers make sense of and assess children's learning. This has led me to my current research, which focuses on investigating teachers' understandings and practices of assessment.

Theoretical framework

The key theoretical framework that I have used within this study is social constructionism. At the core of social constructionism is the belief that knowledge is constructed through interaction and social processes (Burr, 1995; Lock & Strong, 2010). Knowledge is seen not as something people have or do not have, but rather as something people do together; knowledge exists between people (Burr, 1995; Lock & Strong, 2010; Moss, Dillon, & Statham, 2000). Social constructionists believe that people create knowledge together, rather than discover it (Burr, 1995). Reality and meanings are established through social processes in the course of everyday social interactions. Lock and Strong (2010) believe "people are self-defining and socially constructed participants in their shared lives" (p. 7). People are therefore actively creating rather than producing knowledge, and there are many alternative constructions of knowledge. Active interactions with other people in society produce and sustain knowledge (Burr, 1995, Moss et al., 2010). Language helps make it possible for people to construct knowledge (Burr, 1995).

Sociocultural approaches to education, as evident within *Te Whāriki*, are seen to be based on social constructionist views of knowledge (Ministry of Education, 1996). Drawing on social constructionist perspectives to guide this study within an early childhood setting was therefore a good fit.

Methodology

This article draws on a qualitative ethnographic study of one early childhood setting. The study is guided by three main questions: How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessments?

A qualitative research approach was used, as I aimed to develop an understanding of the meanings early childhood teachers associate with assessment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The research was conducted in one early childhood setting, with teachers in the over two year old room, over a period of seven months, and using multiple methods of data collection to help develop an in-depth understanding of assessment within the setting. Data collection methods included participant observations, document analysis, attending and recording a fortnightly staff meeting, and six individual semi-structured interviews.

This article focuses on one theme from my initial findings that highlighted some of the ways teachers in the setting were engaging in *assessment work*.



Managing multiple perspectives

Initial research findings highlight that teachers in this setting were putting a lot of effort into assessment practices, with a particular focus on incorporating the voices of children, parents, families/*whānau* and other teachers within documented assessments. Teachers talked about their desire to make multiple perspectives work, where the voices of children, parents, as well as, at times, wider family/*whānau* members and other teachers, were clearly evident within practice in general and documented assessments.

Multiple perspectives were the topic of conversation on numerous occasions during recorded staff meetings, and each teacher discussed multiple perspectives during individual interviews. The general consensus seemed to be that gaining multiple perspectives was the ideal; however, in reality, this did not happen as often as teachers would like: “in a perfect world we would really like time to discuss individual children and would like to share it with parents and with each other” (Excerpt from staff meeting minutes). Within the next staff meeting, a teacher questioned how multiple perspectives were working, and, in response, one teacher articulated: “this is my biggest frustration, how, when and how to make it manageable with all the children.” As part of teachers’ attempts to manage multiple perspectives and get it right, each teacher discussed a range of ways how they currently access multiple perspectives, as well as some strategies they would like to try. What follows is a discussion of some of the strategies identified by the teachers.

Informal conversations with parents

Including the details of conversations with parents within learning stories was considered one strategy to include the perspectives of parents, although this strategy was discussed with mixed results. Teachers said it often came down to the relationships they had with certain parents and whether teachers were organised enough to make notes that they could later draw on in non-contact times.

Through informal conversations with parents and families, one teacher felt “you can start to build those connections and hopefully bring those back when it comes to learning stories.”

Relationships with children and families/*whānau* are an important aspect of ECE environments and a founding principle of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Teachers within this setting felt that having a strong relationship with children and their parents made it easier to gain an insight into children’s experiences outside the setting, and use this information to guide teaching and learning.

Formal centre evenings discussing assessment and children’s learning

As part of a centre led self-review process, a questionnaire was completed by parents, and many parents felt that more ‘formal’ opportunities to discuss children’s learning within the setting would be desirable. Teachers debated this at length and investigated some of the ways the setting could provide more



formal parent evenings. Teachers questioned whether adding formal parent evenings to the more common practice of informal conversations with parents at drop off and pick up times may help ensure parents feel informed about their child's learning within the setting.

In this context, Regulation 43 Curriculum standard states that every licensed service provider must

(b) make all reasonable efforts to ensure that the service provider collaborates with the parents and, where appropriate, the family or whānau of the enrolled children in relation to the learning and development of, and decision making about, those children.
(Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 8)

A formal parents' evening to discuss children's learning and assessment procedures within this setting was deemed one way teachers could ensure that all reasonable efforts were being made to keep parents informed.

Child interest sheets

Inviting parents to contribute their views about their child's strengths, interests and abilities also became part of the conversation, and one teacher suggested sending out children's interest sheets on a more regular basis. It was noted that children's interest sheets were generally pasted into the front of children's profile books; however, sending these to parents on a more regular basis may help teachers gain a greater depth of knowledge about children's changing interests.

Providing space in learning stories for parents to contribute

Leaving space at the end of a learning story for parent comment was discussed, and teachers again felt they had mixed results with this strategy. Teachers noted some parents consistently contributed, whilst other teachers felt that parents returned profile books with a blank space or were uncertain about teachers' expectations.

Early versions of learning story templates had a defined space for parental contribution. However, teachers in this setting felt that, due to a feeling that parents were not responding, teachers had become inconsistent in providing space within the story for parental contribution.

Communicating with parents during non-contact

One part time teacher, in particular, made a real effort to ensure she was available during regular scheduled non-contact time, and felt that parents had really appreciated this. This teacher provided parents with her scheduled non-contact times and the centre phone and email address to ensure that parents could contact her.

Adding details of conversations with children into learning stories

Including the details of conversations teachers had with children, in particular, recording children's actual language, was seen as a good thing to do, making learning stories 'better quality.' One teacher suggested strengthening the voices



of children within learning stories by taking the story out of the non-contact space to children and talking with them about the story and photos. Teachers discussed the general practicalities of working with children in this way when you are still 'in ratio;' however, overall teachers felt there was merit in this idea.

Including the perspectives of other teachers

Including the perspectives of other teachers was important to teachers, and they valued time talking with other teachers. However, at times, teachers felt this was a struggle, due to differing work days/hours and busy times on the floor. The only opportunity for some teachers to talk with each other on a regular basis was at fortnightly staff meetings. Often, during these meetings, some teachers felt the majority of time was taken up on what might be considered 'housekeeping' issues and little time was left to discuss children's learning within the setting. Teachers really valued any opportunities they had together to discuss children's learning.

During the centre self-review process, a significant shift was made, and teachers began to prioritise talking about children's learning within staff meetings. Teachers also felt that going through individual children's profile books in pairs provided opportunities for discussion and debate, which were valuable to their professional practice.

E-portfolios

Assessments within this setting were documented in hard copies within individual children's profile books, and a number of teachers articulated that they felt shifting to some form of online format (such as e-portfolios) would potentially strengthen multiple perspectives in relation to parents and wider family members.

Assigned profile books

Teachers were assigned a group of children based on the days children attended the setting and the teachers' scheduled work days. Generally, teachers had between 12-15 children's profile books for which they were responsible. This proved problematic at times, and teachers often commented that they tended to focus on documenting assessments for the children on their list.

To stick to the list or not to had implications for teachers' practice. Some teachers focused on documenting assessments for all children, whilst other teachers tended to focus more on the children on their list. Time and the ability to write learning stories within the allocated timeframe was the major factor here. During one staff meeting, teachers explicitly discussed these tensions and proposed the possibility of getting rid of the lists and focusing on writing stories about anything they noticed as significant learning.

One learning story per month

There was an informal/unwritten understanding that teachers write one learning story per month. Interestingly, however, the manager of the centre explicitly said, in one of my discussions with her, that she would prefer quality stories and was not expecting one learning story per month. Nonetheless, due to time



constraints, teachers often felt pressure to produce learning stories. One teacher noted that this was stressful, “due to time constraints and a sense of pressure, a sense that my books are, it just feels like a stress.”

Blaiklock (2008; 2010), in particular, believes that the amount of time it takes for teachers to write a learning story is not manageable for teachers on a daily basis. In her earlier work, Carr (2001) also recognises that “qualitative and interpretive methods using narrative methods – learning stories – are time-consuming,” highlighting that teachers “have had to develop ways in which these more story-like methods can be manageable” (p. 18).

Sending or handing stories to parents as soon as they are completed

Responses from the parent questionnaire completed as part of the setting self-review process, in addition to teacher reflection, revealed that there was often a lengthy period of time between the teachers writing a learning story and parents reading the learning story. There was a sense that reducing the amount of time between writing a story and children, parents and other teachers reading a story would help to improve communication surrounding children’s learning.

Final thoughts

Assessment within ECE is complex. Although the early childhood sector has been working with learning stories for over a decade now, teachers continue to search for authentic ways to make assessment work. Teachers in this setting were working hard and actively looking for ways they could make assessment work on a daily basis.

Key early childhood literature highlights the importance of involving all members of the learning community within assessment practices (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2004b). Teachers in this setting recognised the importance of including the contributions of children, parents, families/*whānau* and other teachers. This article has discussed some of the practical strategies teachers were using to include multiple perspectives within documented assessment; it has also highlighted some of the struggles and tensions teachers faced as they went about completing assessment documentation.

The learning story framework purposefully avoided providing a road map for how to write a learning story, so that each early childhood setting and teacher could find their own meaningful ways of assessing children’s learning. Teachers in this setting were working together and trying out a range of different strategies to suit their learning community, engaging in reflective practice and professional conversations to make assessment work for all. In a recent literature scan for the Ministry of Education (2015), the writers have called for “a reinstatement of professional development in assessment for all teachers and in all early childhood settings” (p. 54). Preliminary findings from this research project also suggest that more time to engage in professional discussions with other teachers can only enhance teachers’ understandings and use of formative assessment practices.



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