

## Celebrating assessment through everyday collective leadership.

Janice Pennells | *Early Childhood Teacher*

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All early childhood teachers are expected to contribute to the assessment of children's learning, yet the enactment and understandings surrounding assessment are complex. Underpinned by sociocultural perspectives, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) espouses the importance of learning supported through contextual knowledge and relational teaching. The process of assessment is therefore highly collaborative, drawing on the expertise of multiple participants to inform a meaningful curriculum for children. In this article, I explore teachers' leadership of assessment in early childhood education through the lens of everyday collective leadership (Cooper, 2022), drawing on examples of my experiences and continued learning as an infant and toddler teacher, practicing assessment as a part of my daily work.

### Introduction

My interest in assessment in early childhood education began when I joined Playcentre, at the same time as the inception of the narrative style of assessment, over twenty years ago. I absorbed the excitement of learning from others about a formative approach to assessment which values multiple perspectives from the team. Moving from Playcentre to a Community Preschool, my learning continued. A different team, philosophy, and organisational structure presented new challenges and another opportunity to learn alongside colleagues. Throughout my journey, one aspect remains unchanged. I learnt that working with children is a relational team-oriented role, with every teacher a leader in promoting positive experiences and outcomes for children.

I was inspired to write this article when my team engaged in an in-depth investigation, an internal evaluation (Education Review Office, 2021), of our assessment practices. In this article, I begin with an overview of assessment in early childhood education, then introduce the concept of everyday collective leadership and share my experiences in understanding, contributing to, and leading assessment as a part of day-to-day teaching.

### Assessment in early childhood education

Early childhood services throughout Aotearoa New Zealand are guided by *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) in implementing a rich curriculum. Underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical framework, teachers' assessment of children's learning recognise the wider contexts of children's lives and values multiple perspectives, including the children's perspective, to inform ongoing learning. Assessment is, therefore, formative as teachers notice, recognise, and

respond to children’s interests and skills, either in the moment or more formally over time (MoE, 2017). The formative process of assessment is described by Drummond (2012) “as the way in which in our everyday practice, we observe children’s learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use” (p. vii). Therefore, teachers lead the assessment practice, using a range of strategies to enrich assessment that informs, consolidates, and extends learning (MoE, 2017).

The learning story, a strengths-based narrative form of assessing a child’s learning and identity as a learner, is a common assessment tool in early childhood education (Carr & Lee, 2019). In addition to learning stories, alternative ways including an Initiating Parent Voice Form (Whyte, 2016), and Tri-assessment model (Werry et al., 2020) have developed as teachers strive for manageable and meaningful assessment. *Te Whāriki* suggests multiple methods of assessment, a notion affirmed by McLachlan (2018) who advocates for a combination of modes to add richness to shared understandings. Furthermore, rather than viewing assessment as separate from teaching and learning, Cooper (2017) found forms of assessment, including daily diaries and collaborative discussion with colleagues, whānau and children in everyday practice. Thus, the multiple methods of assessment highlight the need for teachers to use their professional knowledge and support each other in promoting children’s learning.

### **Everyday collective leadership**

Leadership in education is complex with a focus on outcomes influencing leading as a singular hierarchal position (Turton & Wrightson, 2017). Within recent years, the New Zealand early childhood sector has advanced in how leadership practice is understood, implemented and supported (Thornton, 2019). Research has explored the emergence of distributed leadership which values collective action, aligning with the partnership foundation of *Te Whāriki*, and team orientated culture of most early childhood settings (Denee & Thornton, 2017). A shared approach to leadership is affirmed in *Our code, our standards* (Education Council, 2017) with the standard, Professional Relationships, requiring teachers to “actively contribute and work collegially” (p. 18). However, the collegial nature of ECE settings, which has implications for leading practice, is less visible in the *Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession* (Education Council, 2018).

When teachers work together, understand each other, embrace an enjoyment of learning, and work towards common values, the curriculum implementation, assessment practices and outcomes for children are enriched. In her study of leadership practices in two infant and toddler teaching teams, Cooper (2022) found that the effective smooth operation of each room was shaped by all teachers taking the lead, simultaneously recognising, and responding to the evolving needs of the group. Whilst the positional leader was present, there appeared little hierarchical influence. Instead, a peaceful responsive environment flowed with leadership practice and mutual respect. Cooper (2022) conceptualised this team approach as everyday collective leadership, concluding that when the efforts and experiences of everyone are valued, there are shared endeavours and positive outcomes. I draw on key ideas of everyday collective leadership, including collegiality, collaboration, teacher strength, and collective learnings to explore the enactment of leading assessment in my setting.

### **Leading assessment collegially**

In early childhood education, the foundation of assessment is based on a relationship of trust and a commitment to getting to know a child and their whānau to establish a learning partnership (Pennells, 2018). Building reciprocal trust takes time and works best when the whole team works collegially. Collegiality is a key component of everyday collective leadership and describes the democratic support and respect between team members (Cooper, 2019). For example, when a child is transitioning into my centre, I actively seek opportunities to establish a reciprocal relationship with the child and whānau. I am supported in being attentive and present by team members helping in informally responding to other children's interests and needs. As I gather information, I am leading assessment by inviting others' perspectives, verbally sharing and contributing to written assessment. The collective relational trust between team members influences the child's transition as we work together, valuing each other's capabilities in maintaining learning partnerships with all children and whānau.

In a shared teaching space, collegiality directly influences the ability of teachers to support relationship building and learning for all. The child-teacher, whānau-teacher, and teacher-teacher relationships all interplay as teachers learn about, make sense of, and plan as part of assessment (McLaughlin et al., 2015). Collegiality suggests that power is evenly spread as colleagues instinctively notice and respond to the movements and cues of others. In my team, this might be the natural move of a colleague to support a teacher who is observing a child moving from inside to outside, or being present to allow for an uninterrupted child-teacher or whānau-teacher interaction. Organisational influences such as lunch breaks, non-contact time or staff sickness may complicate collegiality within the team by disrupting the predicted flow of relationships, but positional leaders and teachers collaborate to maintain the best possible cohesiveness for children.

### **Collaboration is key**

Collaboration is central to everyday collective leadership and a core component in formative assessment. Informal assessment happens in the moment as teachers notice and respond to children's developing skills and interests (MoE, 2017). As a teacher, I can never be sure of exactly what a child's learning interest is, especially when their communication is still developing. Through dialogue with other participants about learning and creating opportunities for collaboration, such as revisiting photos together, I can add depths to our shared understandings. Furthermore, initiating conversations with whānau have been invaluable in making sense of what I and/or others have noticed and acknowledges the vital role parents have in contributing to assessment (Pennells, 2018). The inclusion of multiple perspectives adds authenticity and value to learning events (Cooper & Hedges, 2014) affirming assessment is not one teachers' work but a culture of collective effort.

Assessment also happens over time as observations of children's interests, knowledge and skills are gathered and made visible in documented formats. Documenting learning through everyday collective leadership values the expertise of all participants in enriching understandings and collectively designing possible pathways forward. The use of digital technology has influenced the timely and accessible means teachers, whānau and children can collaborate (Hooker, 2019). In my centre, the diverse ways learning can be pictorially shared has opened exciting avenues for gaining multiple voices. Teachers in my team are leading assessment daily when valued learning is

made visible in accessible ways (laminated photos, wall displays, notebooks, portfolios) for children, whānau and teachers to revisit and discuss. However, ongoing reflection is needed to ensure digital communications do not just report on learning but are effective in promoting shared dialogue with colleagues, whānau and children to inform pedagogy (Pennells, 2022).

### **Leading from strength**

Situated within the process of assessment is a multitude of teaching practices, affording opportunities for each team member to contribute their strengths. Everyday collective leadership encourages teachers to lead in their areas of interest and share relevant knowledge and skills. In this way, assessment is less of an isolated endeavour but an opportunity to work collectively toward a common goal. Teachers in my setting take the lead in contributing their skills, where relevant, to enrich curriculum experiences. For example, during a team meeting we drew on teachers' observations of valued learning and collectively identified an interest in children's connections with rural/farm life. We then invited whānau perspectives, including requesting pictures from home/on the farm. We also encouraged a teacher skilled in technology to develop an *Adventures on the Farm* book inclusive of all nursery children. Other team members contributed their ideas in setting up the environment, collectively promoting children's thinking and ongoing learning.

Both teachers and positional leaders can ensure strengths are given recognition by acknowledging assessment as documented and non-documented. An invitation to contribute ideas, a prompt to make a resource, positive feedback on a teacher/child interaction or a shared interest in environmental set-ups can make more robust meaningful responses to noticed learning. Furthermore, positional leaders can ensure teachers have sufficient time, to develop ideas, research and grow as leaders. Our evaluation process identified that assessment to us involved a range of everyday pedagogical practices. Consequently, positional leaders are now accommodating additional non-contact time for any team member wanting to generate resources to strengthen teaching and learning. This is proving an invaluable opportunity to consolidate everyday collective leadership by valuing teachers' skills to lead, including their potential in innovatively leading assessment.

### **Collectively embracing learning**

A sense of togetherness in teaching teams is important in providing a quality curriculum. A key component of everyday collective leadership is a shared commitment to reflective practice and ongoing learning (Cooper, 2022). Participating collectively in a centre wide internal evaluation supported our team to come together to consolidate understandings, discuss differences and enjoy the benefits to teaching and learning when there is a shared vision of growth. The combined voice adds strength and richness to the process, as affirmed by Cooper (2019) "we are in this together" (p. 14). Embracing learning together, irrespective of one's position, reflects collective leadership practice.

Through the lens of everyday collective leadership, the voice of everyone is listened to, respected, and validated (Cooper, 2022). At times when there are points of difference or a wide diversity of ideas, as was the case in the initial stages of our evaluation process, both positional leaders and teachers play an important role in keeping

communication pathways open. Over time, from drawing on the thoughts and experiences of all teachers in our centre, I feel relational trust has deepened. Consequently, the collective understandings, practices and enjoyment of leading assessment have positively developed. Even though the sense-making process is ongoing, valuing honest dialogue and inviting the contributions of all team members has inspired a shared commitment to continued improvement.

### **Conclusion**

Celebrating the leadership practices, tensions, and possibilities embodied in the day-to-day work of teachers widens the horizon of assessment. Both assessment and everyday collective leadership involve collaboratively building on teachers' skills and knowledge to enhance their ongoing professional learning. As I have reflected and explored assessment through the lens of everyday collective leadership, my appreciation of the diversity of valuable contributions of my team is heightened. I can move beyond the uncertainty of choosing what to document and enjoy the many other aspects of assessment that make a difference to children. My aspiration is for teachers to understand, and to be recognised for their day-to-day leadership practice and for the wider ECE community to celebrate the rich assessment that is enabled through everyday collective leadership.

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