

Early Childhood Assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand: Perspectives on Narrative Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment practices in education are important because they evidence desired and actual learning outcomes of curriculum. In Aotearoa New Zealand narrative assessment in the form of Learning Stories is the assessment method used for the National early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*. This literature review collates different perspectives on the current approach of assessing dispositional learning and working theories through narrative stories, with the intention that a best practice outcome might be observed. Quantitative studies appeared scarce on this subject, with most literature consisting of qualitative verdicts and theory-based opinions. Findings support the current assessment and curriculum goals in New Zealand, but valid concerns raised support further consideration and more substantial research.

Keywords: *Narrative Assessment, Accountability, Learning Story, Dispositional Learning, Early Childhood Education, Te Whāriki*



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Introduction

In the 1990s educators took a more passive role in children's learning but these approaches have been challenged by socio-cultural perspectives encouraged by the 1996 National curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), developed to support interaction with children for the extension of their thinking and learning ([Peters & Davis, 2011](#)). Early childhood pedagogy that provides support for thoughtful engagement in children's natural daily interactions and appreciation for what has been termed intelligence 'in the wild' is grounded in formative assessment as the context for pedagogy ([Peters & Davis, 2011](#)). Formative assessment involves using assessment as a process to improve learning, rather than as a tool to measure 'fixed' ability (Turnock, 2009). Summative assessment focuses on performance at a particular point in time and is most often utilised to quantify a child's ability for external reasons against normalised references (Turnock, 2009). The avoidance of summative assessments in early childhood education has meant that formative assessment is prioritised and teachers work collaboratively with children to provide meaningful feedback and aid in natural learning moments. Narrative assessment is used to provide feedback to children in an ipsative manner, where development and learning progress on an individualised continuum consisting of observed dispositions and working theories. This process-based formative assessment has garnered tensions due to the way it is carried out by teachers and the lack of documentation detailing children's learning as a result. Scholars have argued that the accountability of dispositional

assessment and the results of teacher impact support further research or clearly defined learning outcomes Turnock, 2009).

This review seeks to consolidate and discuss ideas relating to assessment in early childhood education with the intention to help inform a best-practice outcome. Assessment is a broad and important topic in education, with decades of literature and studies informing its application. With this in mind, this review narrows its focus specifically to literature with a focus on the current early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*.

Learning Story Approach

Early childhood assessment in New Zealand is currently undertaken through 'Learning Stories'. These are a form of narrative assessment with a focus on recognising dispositions and children's working theories that provide a space, largely without boundaries, for educators to assess children's learning. This steps away from the New Zealand Competent Child approach where a "checklist of single items for any given skills or knowledge area [were found to be] unreliable indicators of children's performance at this age" ([Wiley, Thompson, & Hendricks, 1996, p. 29](#)).

Te Whāriki was designed to have assessment fit alongside the curriculum where both were created for, and intended to maintain, the interests of children and their families ([Carr, et al., 2002](#)). Therefore, assessment practices should involve families, empower children as competent learners, consider teacher child relationships and relate to the holistic development of the child ([Education Review Office, 2008](#)). Narrative assessment fulfils this by "giv[ing] a sense of ownership... and provid[ing]

feedback to learners and their families" (Smith, 2013a, p.266). Learning and teaching stories were developed through government-funded research initiatives to develop best-practice for assessment (Carr, et al., 2002). Additional documents exist such as *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004), which provide examples for how to write learning stories, as well as *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Ministry of Education, 2009) which provides insight specifically for Māori assessment. Sluss (2005) found that effective assessment resulted from the involvement of parents in the process.

Assessment as a collaborative and beneficial process is possible when quality observations of dispositional learning and working theories are recorded. Such an approach will incorporate both a dispositional and ipsative learning measurement. Lucas and Claxton (2010) proposed that intelligence is not fixed and this is demonstrated in those moments when a child is faced with a particular challenge and forced to rely on 'dispositions' to solve the problem. Dispositions are described as "participation repertoires... and [socio-cultural] orientations towards learning that are shaped during interactive and relational experiences" (Cooper, Hedges, & Dixon, 2014, p. 736), which the learner utilises in their learning contexts. Dispositions are different from knowledge, skills and understanding. Katz described them as "motivation-related orientations towards learning [which are] as important as the oft-quoted educational outcomes of skills and knowledge" (as cited in Cooper, Hedges, & Dixon, 2014, p.736). Assessment with this kind of socio-cultural foundation is designed to allow children to feel empowered in their learning, and values the cultural contexts from which much of their learning has arisen. Carr has previously acknowledged concerns regarding the validity of narrative assessment, but proposed that "conventional criteria of validity and reliability can be replaced by judgements of 'accountability'" (as cited in Blaiklock, 2008, p.79). In this regard, narrative assessment directly places accountability with the educators who are observing children's learning socio-culturally, as it occurs naturally during interactions with people, the environment, and other resources. Assessment practices that are 'ipsative', focusing on the child's progress over time in relation to their past ability rather than prescribed standards, can be achieved through narrative assessment (Smith, 2013a). The artificial context of summative testing may lead to inaccurate results where children performed unnaturally due to anxiety or misunderstood expectation (Smith, 2013a).

Challenges to Narrative Assessment

Assessment practices should foster children's learning in a meaningful way and contribute valuably to the process of learning (Turnock, 2009). In one New Zealand study where educators explored children's working theories in action in five Playcentres, the authors found it difficult to distinguish working theories most relevant to learning and also how to respond to children's learning without unintentionally hijacking the direction of their interests (Peters & Davis, 2011). If educators have trouble recognising children's learning and responding in ways that offer opportunities to extend this, then perhaps clearer guidelines around knowledge assessment are required. Smith (2013a) notes that the way judgements are made when assessing has a profound effect on children's experience with the learning, noting that some judgements do not enhance the wellbeing or learning of children. In their qualitative New Zealand case study that explored teachers' views about involving whānau in assessment, the authors found that although *Te Whāriki* instigates

a collaborative approach towards assessment of dispositional learning and encourages discussion with parents, some teachers did not perceive such collaboration in assessment (Cooper, Hedges, & Dixon, 2014). They indicated that teachers' could be more aware of the evolution of learning dispositions and consider the socio-cultural nature of their development. This study also highlighted the difficulty in upholding collaborative expectations on assessment due to philosophical tensions around how to implement such processes (Cooper, Hedges, & Dixon, 2014).

In his critical analysis paper, Ken Blaiklock has been outspoken in his criticism of the Learning Story approach of assessment, having observed that teachers were struggling to evidence language development with this technique of narrative assessment (Blaiklock, 2008). He cites a lack of research studies in evidencing the effectiveness of the implementation of Learning Stories and is critical of the qualitative approach to assessment. Blaiklock (2008) is also critical of Margaret Carr's suggestions as to how to increase the accountability of educators performing narrative assessment, believing that any observation is lacking in adequate evidence. He further adds that Learning Stories are incapable of reliably evidencing children's learning progression and that the development of knowledge and skills often remains unassessed. In a later discussion paper around the use, or need, of evidence to support the effectiveness of *Te Whāriki*, Blaiklock is critical of the efficacy of *Te Whāriki* and he argues that too much responsibility is being placed on Centre staff and practices and little regulation or assessment of their accountability by the Education Review Office, who rely on the staff assessment stories to demonstrate quality (Blaiklock, 2013). Similarly, Turnock, in her discursive analysis of contemporary Early Childhood assessment in New Zealand, found that many teachers have struggled with Learning Stories as an assessment method, identifying that professional development is needed to assist teachers to reconceptualise their understanding of assessment practices (Turnock, 2009).

Potential Assessment Alternatives

Blaiklock (2013) expresses respect for the intentions of the curriculum and assessment in Aotearoa but believes having such little prescription and regulation for learning outcomes and assessment areas is dangerously lacking in accountability. He does not believe that "overly prescriptive programmes" would improve the outcomes, but advocates for more balance and a clearer association between curriculum and assessment (2013, p. 3). This balance could potentially come in the form of criterion-referenced assessment, which clearly links the curriculum to the assessment by providing a guideline of what to assess through an external standard (Turnock, 2009).

Blaiklock (2013) believes that discussion of potential alternatives is stymied by a lack of open discussion in early childhood education in New Zealand, as a result of the prominence that the curriculum's inclusive intentions have garnered internationally and the widely-held beliefs of those in the field. Smith (2013b) claims to encourage the critique of *Te Whāriki* as a method for keeping the curriculum and assessment of high quality, and specifically invites the critique of training early childhood teachers in the form of reflection and discussion but confusingly has labelled other discussion as attacks on the curriculum.

In a critical literature review, Dunphy (2010) draws on an assessment approach developed in a research endeavour called *Project Spectrum* that was developed in America over a twenty-

year period to provide a fairer and more informative assessment model. This project sought to reliably assess alternate learner cognitive abilities and strengths and to provide a more reliable assessment of learning and development in under-fives. In this project, domains of learning were compartmentalised and detailed observations occurred around tasks that were meaningful, alongside unplanned observations of dispositions, the intention being to blend curriculum and assessment (Dunphy, 2010).

Concerns for Alternate Assessment

Schoolification is a term most often used by those resistant to summative assessment practices in early childhood education to refer to the ‘trickling down’ of government derived educational outcomes. The focus on standardising knowledge and learning viewed most valuable for further schooling concerns those who think these systems are detrimental to an individual’s relationship with learning (Carr, 2001). Prior to the integration of *Te Whāriki*, assessment practices were focused on the specific skills, knowledge and developmental gaps of children where teachers were responsible for remediating these issues, and this often resulted in deficit theorising (Turnock, 2009). Deficit theorising is where an individual is thought to be inherently incapable of acquiring particular skills or abilities for genetic or cultural reasons (Skidmore, 2002) and teachers are therefore absolved from responsibility for poor achievement. Smith (2013a) is critical of summative assessment as the focus is on surface-level learning, such as information recall, where the results constrain and restrict children’s learning rather than support. She compares summative assessment with other measures of intelligence, such as IQ testing which originated through governments requesting a procedure for identifying children who would not benefit from schooling. The categorising of ability which results from summative assessment does not cater for individual differences and can impede children’s potential through institutional or individual teaching beliefs that underlying capacity is measured. There is no correlation between standardised measures of intelligence through early childhood and adult IQ scores (Smith, 2013a) but the classification of an individual as intellectually deficient can result in widespread impact, where the individual is viewed as “undeserving of access to educational or employment opportunities” (Smith, 2013a, p. 251).

Norm-referenced assessment, where children’s achievements are compared against other children, identifies children as performing at, below or above an expected range (Turnock, 2009). The application of these concepts to preschool aged children is a concern because of the long-term issues that negative labels attached to intellect can cause (Lucas & Claxton, 2010). Smith (2013a) argues that summative assessments such as tests do not provide opportunities to understand children’s learning in context or to assess capacity through the use of Vygotsky’s theory of the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ where “expert others” assist with the reaching of new skills or understanding. Another concern with directive learning outcomes is that teachers who focus on trying to get all children to a static level of achievement often utilise techniques which are inappropriate for improving the learning of the most and least capable children (Crooks, 2011 cited in Smith, 2013a). Highlighting this issue in another context, the implementation of the National Standards in 2010 into primary schools moved away from formative assessment, and provides a service of

accountability for schools rather than improving children’s learning (Smith, 2013a).

Conclusion

The literature presented supports the idea that assessment is interdependent on curriculum and the selection of ‘valued knowledges’ and cannot be understood in a capacity of its own (McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2010). This correlates with the idea that assessment of knowledge, skills and disposition development, or working theories, should be considered in relation to context and discourages the idea of standalone assessment techniques. Suitable studies to further support the ideas discussed were limited, potentially meaning that findings would not translate to other teaching and learning contexts. It was clear that although a number of studies support the current assessment and curriculum goals in New Zealand, there are some concerns that are worthy of consideration. Summative or norm-referenced assessment methods are not desired by academics in local or international contexts and appear to be the result of governmental initiatives aimed at quantifying measures of institutional accountability. Interestingly, the research was dominated by qualitative verdicts and theoretical opinion as opposed to studies with objective quantitative findings. The intentions of New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum remain unchallenged, but concerns remain regarding accountability measures. Due to the context-reliant relationship for assessment, New Zealand specific studies would be required for informing changes to best-practice outcomes in early childhood education.

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