

# 'Assessment in ECE is overwhelming at times'

## *Uncovering the challenges of assessing four year old children's learning*

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### **The assessment of children's learning should play a central role in the teaching and learning process.**

Yet concerns regarding the quality of early childhood teachers' assessment practices have been repeatedly raised by the Education Review Office (2007, 2013, 2015). But how do teachers experience assessment?

This article presents some of the preliminary findings from a national survey which explored early childhood teachers' understandings, beliefs and practices in relation to assessing four year old children's learning. While a range of perspectives in relation to assessment were evident in the survey responses, this article focuses on the issues and challenges identified by teachers. Some suggestions regarding possible next steps are also made. The findings presented here are a small, but important, element of a larger study. Further analysis of the data collected during both phases is currently being undertaken and additional discussion and dissemination will follow.

### **Assessment in New Zealand ECE settings**

The introduction of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (ECE) *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) required the development of assessment approaches which supported the curriculum's underpinning principles (Carr, May & Podmore, 1998). In 1995 a research project was undertaken by Carr and colleagues to develop assessment approaches which aligned with *Te Whāriki*. The resulting narrative based assessment tool was Learning Stories. Since then, ECE teachers have been encouraged and supported to use Learning Stories to assess children's learning by the Ministry of Education (MoE), who produced and funded *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009), a nationwide ECE assessment exemplar and professional development project based on Learning Stories. Since being introduced, Learning Stories

have quickly become the most commonly used assessment tool in the New Zealand ECE sector. As noted by Mitchell (2008), following a nationwide survey, 94% of teachers reported that they were using Learning Stories to document children's learning.

However, a number of concerns have been raised about the quality of assessment practices in New Zealand ECE settings. In reviewing the effectiveness of the professional development associated with *Kei Tua o te Pae*, Stuart, Aitken, Gould, and Meade (2008) noted that assessment documentation was often more of a 'scrapbook' of children's experiences rather than an analysed account of the learning which children had engaged in and which showed their development over time. In recent years the quality of teachers' assessment practices have also been questioned by the Education Review Office (ERO). In 2007, a national ERO report stated that the quality of assessment practices was inconsistent across and within services. In another national report published in 2013, ERO noted their concern that assessment practices continued to be an area requiring improvement in many services. Such concerns were again noted in a report focusing on transition from ECE services to school, where ERO stated that "assessment records often focused on children's participation in activities, rather than their learning" (2015, p. 17).

While the perspectives of evaluators and ERO are known in relation to assessment, there is less research relating specifically to the perspectives of teachers. As teachers are involved in the day-to-day assessment of children, their perspectives about the realities they face in assessing children's learning needs to be sought and added to the evidence base on effectiveness of assessment of young children in this country. Given that it is teachers who are responsible for assessing children's learning, it is critical that their beliefs, understandings and perspectives are understood in order to comprehend why assessment is happening in the

ways that it is. While research has been undertaken with teachers in relation to the assessment of infants and toddlers (see Schurr, 2009; Turnock, 2009), and by Davis (2006) with teachers in a mixed age setting, this current study has focused on teachers' assessment of four year olds. This is a timely focus, given the MoE's current focus on the need to enhancing the quality of children's experiences as they transition from the ECE sector to the compulsory schooling sector (Ministry of Education, 2015).

## Research design

The survey built on the previously mentioned nationwide survey of ECE teachers' assessment practices carried out by Mitchell (see Mitchell, 2008), as well as a more recent survey undertaken by Gunn and Gilmore (2014) which focused on ECE student teachers' beliefs about assessment. To examine the complex and multifaceted topic of teachers' understandings, beliefs and practices a 'quan – QUAL' mixed-methods research design (Punch, 2009) was developed. The study involved a nationwide online survey, followed by interviews with a purposeful sample of people who were particularly knowledgeable about the topic. To include a diverse range of perspectives, reflective of the diverse make-up of the ECE sector, invitations to participate were sent to both teacher-led and parent-led services. The parent-led services included in the survey were Playcentre and Te Kōhanga Reo, which both have their own teacher qualifications. The Ministry of Education (MoE) database was used to source email addresses, with more than 2400 emails sent to people with the required

qualifications inviting them to complete the online survey. The survey included both open and closed-ended questions, and was designed to support respondents to share their understandings, beliefs and practices in relation to assessing four year old children's learning.

A total of 440 responses to the survey were received, with 380 of these responses being included in the final data analysis. A large number of the respondents (53%) identified themselves as holding leadership positions within their services, while 33% were teachers/educators, with the remainder in 'other' or 'relieving' roles. As shown below in Table 1.1, responses were received from 11 different service types.

To participate in the survey, respondents from teacher-led services were required to be qualified and registered teachers. In the parent-led services educators were invited to participate if they held one of the following: the Playcentre qualification of Level 3 (or above), Te Kohanga Reo's qualification of Tino Rangatiratanga Whakaoakari Tohu (or a recognised teaching qualification). Those who choose to complete the survey were, for the most part, experienced teachers. Just 21% of the respondents had been teaching five years or less.

The respondent's highest level of qualification is presented in Table 1.2. Of significance is that the majority of respondents held a Bachelor of Education (Teaching, ECE). In terms of when respondents completed their first early childhood qualification, 10% did so in 1985 or earlier, while

**Table 1.1 Composition of survey responses by Service Type**

Service Type		Percentage of Responses to Survey	Percentage of Sector
Playcentre		8%	12%
Te Kōhanga Reo		1%	12%
Kindergarten		33%	16%
Education and Care (see detail below)		56%	60%
Other		2%	
Education and Care comprised of:	Māori Immersion	<1%	
	Cook Island Māori and Samoan 'language nests'	<2%	
	Montessori	3%	
	Rudolf Steiner	<1%	
	Correspondence School	1%	
	Corporate Education and Care	3%	
	Private Education and Care	28%	
	Community Based Education and Care	19%	

32% indicated between 1986 and 2000, and the remaining 58% between 2001 and 2015.

**Table 1.2 Qualifications of respondents to the survey**

Qualification Type	Percentage of Respondents
Playcentre Qualification (Level 3 or higher)	5%
2 year Diploma (e.g. Kindergarten Diploma, PIECCA Diploma etc.)	6%
3 year Diploma of Teaching (ECE)	17%
Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (ECE)	38%
Bachelor Degree in another discipline	2%
Graduate Diploma of Teaching (ECE)	11%
Post-graduate level qualification (e.g. PhD, Masters, Honours)	11%
Tino Rangatiratanga Whakaoakari Tohu	1%
Other	9%

### The Challenges: Findings and Discussion

Recurring themes about the challenges and issues relating to assessment noted by respondents included concerns about the quality of teachers' assessment practices and the lack of continuity in assessment practices between the ECE and school sectors. Along with the scarcity of professional development (PD) related to assessment, another recurring theme was the lack of time to assess children and then document that assessment, and the amount of documentation required.

#### Quality concerns

The survey responses suggest that many New Zealand ECE teachers are grappling with a range of issues and challenges in relation to assessment. Although respondents frequently signalled that they see Learning Stories as a useful and appropriate tool for assessing four year old children's learning, several expressed concerns about Learning Stories and the fact that they are the only assessment tool being used in many ECE settings, many noting that a wider range of assessment tools was needed:

*"In numerous ways i.e. not just Learning Stories."* – Kindergarten, Head Teacher

Some respondents also documented challenges related to the aspects of children's learning which are being assessed, indicating the wish to employ a wider range of assessment methods in order to effectively assess four year old children's learning:

*"I think there needs to be more skills based assessment with a focus on identifying areas that a child excels in 'and' (a big*

*AND) things they struggle with and may lag behind so they can be given the support they need to improve!"* – Private Education and Care Setting, Reliever

How these challenges and issues can and should be addressed is less clear; many respondents explicitly stated that they did not want to see 'school like' assessments, standardised tests or checklists being used to assess four year old children's learning in ECE settings:

*"I do not believe in checklists or testing of four year olds."* – Private Education and Care Setting, Co-ordinating Supervisor

*"NOT formal checklists – comparing children is most unhelpful."* – Community Based Education and Care Setting, Centre Manager

Some respondents raised concerns that fellow teachers were not consistently engaging in high quality assessment practices.

*"From my observation Learning Stories are most often observations that are not necessarily indicating learning as such but documenting an event of some kind. These are often full of errors."* – Other, Teacher

*"Too many ECE professionals pass off substandard work as Learning Stories and I believe that this belittles our profession....."* – Kindergarten, Head Teacher

#### Continuity between ECE and school

Respondents also indicated concerns relating to the lack of continuity and collaboration between the ECE and school sectors in relation to assessment, as the following responses illustrate:

*"Teachers have to write Learning Stories in a way that new entrant teachers are able to read between the lines to understand the child as Learning Stories are not deficit based."* – Private Education and Care Setting, Owner/Teacher

*"I would like to see more discussion between ECE and Primary sectors about what information is helpful for New Entrant teachers to know about a child as they transition to school."* – Kindergarten, Teacher

In light of the need to enhance continuity between the ECE and school sectors (Peters, 2010), it is perhaps not surprising that teachers specifically identified assessment as an area which requires further work. New entrant and ECE teachers need to be supported to engage in ongoing and sustained collaboration if they are to understand each other's approaches to assessment, to build shared understanding and enhance continuity between the sectors.

#### Working conditions in ECE

When asked to rank five potential barriers to their work, 43.4% identified the amount of non-contact time which they had available to complete assessment documentation as having the most impact on their ability to assess children's learning, as the following responses illustrate:

*“The majority of our Learning Stories within our centre are done outside of our work hours”* – Kindergarten, Head Teacher

*“Learning Stories can be so time consuming to write.”* – Kindergarten, Head Teacher

While the number of teachers identifying this barrier is lower than that identified by Mitchell (2008), where 59% indicated this as the most common barrier, issues relating to non-contact time remained widespread. When non-contact time is scheduled, the other tasks that need to be completed during this time, interruptions and non-contact being ‘lost’ due to staff absences were all indicated as factors impact on how long it took respondents to complete Learning Stories.

*“We only have one day a month (non-contact) rotating 1 staff a week.”* – Te Kōhanga Reo, Head Teacher

*“I often fill in when teachers are sick so my non-contact is not happening.”* – Privately Owned Education and Care setting, Supervisor

Further illustrating the challenges of time, time to assess children was acknowledged by 42.9% of the respondents as having the most impact.

*“It [assessment] is essential but often the number of children daily makes it difficult to do it meaningfully.”* – Kindergarten, Teacher

*“Many of my peers find assessment very stressful due to time restraints. So assessment is rushed and not necessarily quality.”* – Community Based Education and Care Setting, Teacher

It is clear that time, and specifically the lack of it, is a significant issue for many ECE teachers. Learning Stories are a time consuming approach to assessment (Carr, 2001), and along with the ongoing intensification of teachers’ work (Apple, 2004), it is not surprising that administration requirements and workload have been identified as causes of stress by New Zealand ECE teachers (McGrath & Huntington, 2007).

Respondents also indicated that the amount of assessment documentation required of them is also an issue.

*“Assessment is fine. All the time that goes into the written assessment for the parents is a waste of time. All the parents want to see are pictures of their children.”* – Montessori, Co-ordinating Supervisor

*“I don’t believe that occasions of learning should have to result in an A4 typed document with inserted photos as the exemplars lead us to believe.”* – Playcentre, Co-ordinating Supervisor

### **Expectations**

Some respondents specifically noted the impact of MoE and ERO assessment expectations, along with those of their own setting, as driving the amount of assessment documentation they were engaging in.

*“Assessment of children’s learning is important – the focus on formal documentation is not. .... Accountability to the Ministry has become an overwhelming factor in the amount of time we*

*spend on providing documentation.”* – Kindergarten, Teacher

It is however worth noting that while the 2011 ECE Licencing Criteria (Ministry of Education, 2014) requires services to engage in assessment, planning and evaluation, no regulations govern how this should happen, what tools should be used, or how often teachers should be engaging in these practices. As pointed out by Blaiklock (2010), teachers are not required to use Learning Stories.

### **Professional development**

The call for increased access to funded Professional Development (PD) specifically related to assessment was a repeating theme throughout the survey. In the 12 months prior to completing the survey, 49% of respondents indicated they had participated in five hours or less of assessment related PD, with 28% having two hours or less. This likely reflects reduced funding coming into ECE to enable professional learning:

*“I think that the ece sector has been disadvantaged by [the] reduction in professional development opportunities over past years.”* – Kindergarten, Head Teacher

Calls from the sector for more access to PD are not surprising in light of the removal of MoE-funded PD for the ECE sector in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009; McLachlan, 2011). These changes, in conjunction with the fact that there have been no MoE funded publications or resources relating to ECE assessment practices since *Kei Tua o te Pae*, has left teachers without access to support and new information.

## **Limitations**

Constraints are associated with the use of survey as a research method because only the views of those who choose to participate are included. While 380 survey responses have been included in the data analysis, this is a small proportion of responses in comparison to the 16,900 teachers working in ECE settings (Education Counts, 2014), and an unknown number in parent-led services. As shown in Table 1.1, response rates to the survey were not proportional to the make-up of the ECE sector itself, with some service types being over represented and others under represented. There were no responses from teachers in Hospital Based Services, or from Tongan, Niuean, Fijian, or Tokolauan Language Nests. While the number of responses to the survey from Education and Care services was similar to their proportion of the sector as a whole, this was not the case for others. The responses from Playcentre and Te Kōhanga Reo are significantly under-represented while kindergartens were significantly over-represented in the responses. While the study being reported here relates specifically to teachers’ understandings, beliefs and practices in relation to assessing four year old children’s learning, the findings and implications are likely to have wider relevance for other age groups and settings.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

It is apparent from the survey responses that ECE

teachers are confronted by a range of issues and challenges as they seek to assess four year old children's learning. Time, both to assess and to document the assessment, was a strong and recurring theme for a large number of teachers. The preliminary findings shared here suggest that the current heavy reliance on Learning Stories as an assessment approach needs further exploration given the issues and challenges identified by teachers in the sector.

The concerns voiced by teachers in this survey align with those previously identified by Stuart et al. (2008) and ERO (2007/2013/2015), adding further weight to the existing research into the quality of ECE teachers' assessment practices. Successive ERO national evaluations (see 2007; 2013; 2015) have recommended that the MoE needs to ensure all ECE teachers are accessing professional development in relation to assessment. These recommendations have not been acted upon to date, but the views of the survey respondents clearly support ERO's calls for greater funding of professional development for ECE teachers.

Overall, the survey indicates that there are many challenges and much yet to discuss in relation to the assessment of four year old children's learning. Given that assessment is a core aspect of quality teaching practice (Ministry of Education, 2011) it is vital that the issues identified by teachers and the concerns acknowledged by ERO are addressed.

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