

Assessment: a critical companion to early childhood pedagogy

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Chapter overview

This chapter explores a view of assessment in the early years which values children's perspectives and everyday experiences as well as the insight of thoughtful educators. It offers examples of narratives that clarify the role of the educator's 'gaze' in authentic assessment contexts and demonstrates that analysis of ordinary events can contribute to meeting the requirements of accountability frameworks. Reported from an Australian context, the examples of reflective practice have implications for educators working in a wide range of children's services.

Introduction

People working with young children and their families are known variously by such terms as early years practitioners, childcare workers, and University qualified early childhood teachers. For the purposes of clarity in this chapter, differences in experience, country of origin or tertiary qualification will be put to one side in favour of the term 'educator'. While those who have themselves been 'assessed' for their level of qualification – whether in schools, Colleges or Universities – wish to be credited for their achievements, limits in available space and the vagaries of language make the use of a generic term necessary.

This opening brings us to the focus of this chapter: What do we mean by assessment in the early years? This is a deeply complex arena which invites wide reading and discussion rather than automatic acceptance of any singular approach. This chapter will offer an overview of interpretations of this term and several narratives that illustrate authentic approaches to understanding and recording children's growth and learning.



Reflection point

As you read this chapter, try to develop your own definition of 'assessment'. What does the term include? Consider how a narrow approach to defining the term can limit opportunities for children to experience interesting, relationship-rich early childhood settings.

Rethinking

Internationally, attention is being drawn to assessment in the context of accountability-oriented policies. Narrow approaches can become mechanical and almost medical in tone, while authentic approaches offer rich insight to families and educators (Grisham-Brown et al., 2006; Fleet and Patterson, 2011; Swaffield, 2011). Any attempt to revise, rethink or energise curriculum and pedagogy must consider these challenges within the context of assessment, while noting the importance of assessment FOR learning as well as outcomes-based assessment OF learning (Hargreaves, 2010).

James notes that:

... the word 'assessment' has its roots in the Latin verb *ad sedere* meaning 'to sit beside', a notion somewhat removed from familiar images of examination halls with students writing silently at separated desks. In recent years, the notion that assessment might have something important to do with the teacher sitting beside the student (literally or metaphorically), and gaining an understanding of what the student knows and can do in order to help them move on in their learning, has begun to gain new ground. (2010: 161)

This interpretation of assessment suggests a formative approach where early childhood educators use their observations to build on children's knowledge, skills, dispositions, questions or concerns. Current practices of effective assessment go beyond the traditional idea of collecting data to measure children against developmental norms. Rather, educators think deeply about their observations to understand what they have observed, then use what they understand 'to enrich and extend children's learning' (Cheeseman, 2012: 1). According to Arthur and colleagues:

... contemporary images of children as competent and capable with diverse strengths and interests have challenged educators to look critically at traditional approaches to observation and consider broader approaches to observing, analysing and documenting children's learning. (2012: 286)

While 'assessment' may have negative connotations for the reader as a result of personal experiences as a child or adult learner, the assessment of young children's learning is a significant element of early childhood teachers' work. In this chapter we invite readers to consider their understanding of assessment and its role in early childhood education. We draw on real-life examples of the documentation of children's learning to illustrate key concepts of assessment. These ideas are influenced by practices from Reggio Emilia (pedagogical documentation) and New Zealand (learning stories). The narratives may include observations of children, snippets of conversations, photographs of children engaged in learning, and samples of children's work (including photographs of block building and constructions), along with representations in various media (including painting, clay and drawings). Families are invited to make a contribution to these 'voices' of children and educators. Through thoughtful analysis of this diverse 'data', early childhood practitioners identify essential insights into the learning processes of young children. In this way, 'assessment is occurring alongside learning' (DEEWR, 2010: 37).

This documenting of 'the learner-in-action' (Carr, 2001: 141) makes children's learning visible for children, parents, teachers and communities (Giuduci et al., 2001). Unlike traditional observations which were often for the teacher's eyes only, newer approaches involve staff working collaboratively with colleagues, children and families to create records of learning and assessment. As well as spring-boarding planning, engaging children and families as active participants in assessment 'helps educators to make better sense of what they have observed and supports learning for both children and adults' (DEEWR, 2009: 17). These multiple perspectives embedded in a collaborative approach 'give all participants a voice in documentation and assessment' (Arthur et al., 2012: 289).

Assessment is also essential for accountability purposes. As Stacey notes:

Regardless of the kind of setting teachers work in, they are accountable to others for showing what children are doing, how they are developing, what interests them, who their friends are, and what they are learning. (2009: 109)

As part of the National Quality Standard in Australia, early childhood educators are obliged to demonstrate how 'each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation' (ACECQA, 2011: 32). It is important, therefore, that key stakeholders, including bureaucrats and local administrators are aware of the learning that is happening in early childhood centres. The rich and meaningful information in documentation readily draws attention to unexpected revelations about children's theories of their world, and over time it shows how children have 'engaged with increasingly complex ideas and participated

in increasingly sophisticated learning experiences' (DEEWR, 2009: 17). The following example highlights the importance of thoughtfulness in approaching assessment and the need to move beyond simplistic assumptions about the focus of learning experiences.

Janet speaks: It's about the water

Many years ago as a novice teacher, I planned a traditional experience with four year-olds about floating and sinking. We sat around a tank of water and experimented with an assortment of objects; I would authoritatively state, 'It's floating', 'It's sinking', labelling each action. The next day, to see if my message had 'stuck', I repeated the event, asking each child to tell me what was happening. They easily read my intentions, and correctly labelled objects as 'sinking' or 'floating'. One child, however, looked me directly in the eye and said **'It's wet'**.

The summative 'post-test' assessment of the 'it's wet' child, in its narrowest definition, was that he did not grasp the concept of floating and sinking. But we all know that he knows a whole lot more than that. The rock was indeed wet. As you might have guessed, he was a clever child, quick-witted and funny, who 'read' beyond the educational cultural mores of giving the teacher the answer she wants. I knew that he knew it would sink and indeed had sunk. *He was adding to the concept of sinking, giving another idea for the group to consider.* The formative assessment for my learning would be that I needed to look at my teaching practices, and 'mine' the 'it's wet' concept for the range of possibilities it presented me.

Fortunately I was able to reflect on my single-minded teaching plan, and realise that I had indeed not allowed scope for a wider discussion and meaning making about floating and sinking. For example, could this action be described without water, such as floating in the air? If I had situated myself as a less authoritative 'know-it-all', I might have admitted then, as I admit to you now, that I still don't understand why heavy metal ships don't sink ... My floating and sinking lesson plan was narrow and uninformed, and the summative assessment of it was that I failed. The 'it's wet' chap on the other hand, passed with flying colours, illustrating how I 'ignored the rich interplay of supportive interactions that stimulate and enable learning'. (Hatherly and Richardson, 2007: 54)

This reflection not only reminds us to value the child's perspective and to include the incorporation of the child's 'voice' in curriculum planning; it also foregrounds the importance of reflective practice, of the educator being honest with herself and others about the learning that takes place when she (or he) is thoughtful about assessment processes.

Recognising the policy context

Contemporary assessment practices in Australia are guided by the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), which states that:

Assessment for children's learning refers to a process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning. (DEEWR, 2009: 17)

This positive conception implies a shift in focus towards the recognition of social and cultural contexts of learning, rather than a deficit framework of measuring what a child does not yet know. The Educators Guide for the EYLF also states that:

In order to be assessed, children need to have had opportunities to learn any knowledge, skill or disposition, either through prior experience, intentional teaching, modelling or planned for through the curriculum and learning environment. (DEEWR, 2010: 38)

Here focused opportunity is seen as the key for children's learning.

Janet's example of documentation described above reflects the philosophies presented in the EYLF. It shows assessment as part of an ongoing curriculum decision-making cycle in which there is clear evidence of 'what children know, can do and understand' (DEEWR, 2009: 17). This 'credit-based (rather than deficit-based)' approach to assessment takes a holistic view of learning (Wood and Attfield, 2005: 187), and sees children as 'searching for meaning, with a right to hope, to be considered competent and strong and to be valued' (Rinaldi, 2006: 64).

The Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2010) reminds us that children demonstrate their learning in diverse ways. Therefore documentation intended to support assessment and contribute to teacher planning should reveal greater complexity than can be provided in traditional approaches to assessment. Authentic assessment as portrayed in the analytic narratives shared here provides that complexity.

The following story has a focus on inclusion as a social justice issue, but also highlights the importance of considering assessment over time, rather than in single snap-shot moments.

Janet speaks: The ones with no eyes can't play

Several children were choosing Duplo® figures as the players for a game of table soccer. Several of these figures were rather well loved and their facial features erased by time and wear. These were put on the sidelines, as one child said, *The ones with no eyes can't play*. We interrupted this notion that people who are blind cannot play, by introducing the knowledge that players who were blind used a ball with a bell inside. The children considered that provocation and altered their play.

Months later Serena, while creating the rules for another game and remembering this interlude, said, *Well, how can the blind people play? Maybe we could tie a bell to it.*

Learning takes time. It was only by chance we witnessed Serena's generalisation of the idea that fairness and inclusion crosses game codes.

Another aspect of the consideration of time concerns relationships – the time for children to know each other and the materials available to them, and the time for educators to know families and build points of connection with them. In this light, consider Janet's following narrative.

Janet speaks: The tiger

For several days I observed Adam and Jeremy (both just two years-old) reading an illustrated Birthday Cake book. They sat legs outstretched, to prop the book up, in various places in the room, heads together. Occasional outbursts of laughter and shouts punctuated the game. I was prompted to listen to what was happening after seeing them engage with the book in the midst of a bustling space, where children moving to and fro had to step over them. Their game persisted despite these interruptions. I realised this was something vital to them.

The next day I placed the book on a table in the foyer and invited the boys to read it again. Immediately they resumed their tryst, ignoring my presence. As they flipped through the pages they narrated to each other what they were seeing, labelling the pictures, 'pool, shoe, number three' and so on. It was only on the second run through of the book, as their page turning was inexact, that I was aware that they were hunting a particular cake image. 'Where tiger?' asked Adam, 'yeah where?' agreed Jeremy. At this point it is important to know that the book has over a hundred pages. Each time they reached the end, they returned to the beginning, labelling what they saw with each turned page.

When they reached the animal cakes (wedged between numeral cakes and theme cakes) their labelling became louder, and the page turning more frantic. It was on the fourth run through that they came upon the tiger cake. 'Yeah tiger, tiger' they shout, laughing and looking at each other, slapping the page with gusto. After a few minutes of adoration, they slam the book shut, look once again at each other and say in unison 'Again?' Which indeed they do, and in three more searches find the tiger cake once more. They work together for about 20 minutes, amicably turn taking, and engaging in a joint enterprise.

That evening when chatting to Adam's mother she divulged that Adam's 1st birthday cake was one she had made from that book and it was the tiger cake; Jeremy had been a guest at the party. Aside from the literacy knowledge the boys demonstrated, and their ability to turn take and have delight in each other's company in a sophisticated relationship (beyond the notion of parallel play), dispositions of tenacity and persistence were being evidenced.

This approach to working thoughtfully through narrative helps us understand things about these children we wouldn't know through checklists, domain-based mini-observations, or commercially constrained computer records.

A further example of this is evident in Carr and colleagues' unfolding understanding of a two year-old refugee child's fondness for the centre's rocking horse in the context

of the family's history as donkey traders. Narrative information was able to be shared between the educator and members of the family, collated to pass on to the next centre with the need to get to know a transient young child quickly (Carr et al., 2001: 34–35). Equity and social justice have important places in the consideration of approaches to assessment (see for example, Fleet et al., 2012).

Some readers may be tempted to assume that these insights can only be gained when children are old enough to express themselves verbally, or to draw, write or build their interpretations of the surrounding environment. This is not the case, as the informed educator will 'see' interesting aspects in children's play, explorations and interactions which can be analysed from the perspective of 'assessment' as well as shared with families and other educators as valuable moments within the day's experiences. Thoughtful narratives can highlight curiosity and early thinking as well as infants' urges to connect with people and their surrounding environments.

Janet speaks: Claire and the box

Claire, 15 months, has ambled up to the low outdoor table, to a basket of large gumnuts (woody fruit of the eucalyptus tree). As she goes to place it on the table, it slips and some gumnuts tumble to the floor and into a nearby large fruit box. She looks around questioningly, and I encourage her to pick them up, which she does, starting with the ones on the floor. Each gumnut is collected singly and popped into the basket, often without her looking, as she uses her fingers to find the basket edge, while her head is bent scanning and looking for more. Several have fallen away from the table, and she persists in finding them all. She straightens, and spies the few which had fallen into the box. She lets go of the table, squats down, reaches in and grasps the closest, transferring it to the basket, once again not looking where it is, but using her fingers as a guide. The other gumnuts were too far for her to reach so she stands and begins to try and put her leg into the box, with the aim of getting into it. As it is cardboard, it shifts position, so she quickly holds the table for support. She uses the box's lightness to her advantage and scuffs it closer with a kick of her leg, then attempts to pull the other leg over. The cuff of her pant snags on the edge and the box folds inwards. She pauses, reaches down with her hand and pulls the edge toward her, releasing the foot, which reaches its partner, so she is now fully inside. Now in the box, she stands and looks down, scanning where the gumnuts are. She hunkers down and collects the three from the right. She then stands, turns around, squats down again and gets the remaining nuts. She smiles, looks around, smiles at me, then sits inside the box and rocks gently with her hands on the sides. I know from past observations she is playing 'row, row, row your boat'.

Using the Australian regulatory assessment tool, the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), I can note the following about Claire's ability to

- scan the situation and complete the task without help ('persist when faced with challenges', Outcome 1, p. 22);
- invent a new game referencing previous musical knowledge ('make connections between experiences', Outcome 4, p. 36);

- discover and understand the space around her, and her interaction with it ('try out strategies that were effective to solve problems in one situation in a new context', Outcome 4, p. 36).

Furthermore as a teacher–researcher, I marvel at her spatial awareness skills, as she navigates her way through a minefield of obstacles, fitting her body into spaces and shapes novel to her experience. This willingness to explore space is exciting, as she self-assesses what her body can do by trial and error. I like to call this physical deliberation, a kinaesthetic aesthetic.

Janet speaks: Sarah

Nine months-old Sarah crawls towards the home corner kitchen bench in a determined manner. Each cupboard is stocked with supplies; pans and lids in the left, kitchen utensils in the middle and empty food packets in the right. Once there, she pulls herself up, holding onto the stainless steel edge. Before her are three cupboard doors, partially obscured by her body. She steps to the right and opens the left hand door, bending down to peer inside. Straightening, she steps to the left and opens the middle cupboard. Again she bends to peer inside, while holding onto the edge for support. This time the look is longer; she squats down, reaches inside and pulls out a spatula. Standing she drops it into the sink (into which she can only see by being on tip toes). Turning to her right she opens the last door and after giving inside a cursory look, shuts it and returns to the middle cupboard. Hunkering down in front of the open door, she rummages about, making a delightful clatter. After a few moments she straightens up with a bowl in her hand. Grasping the wooden end of the spatula, she bangs the spatula on the bowl, making more noise. She looks about and sees me watching, gives me a smile and nod, bangs more and waits to see my response. I too smile and together we listen to her noise. Breaking off our joint gaze she gets back to business, using the spatula in the bowl.

For assessment purposes, I can easily tick off (assess) her physical competencies, her persistence and planning skills, as well as her concentration. However the really big questions are these: I wonder *when* it was she learnt about moving away from doors so that they can be opened, and *when* did she make an internal inventory about what is usually kept in these particular cupboards?

What do we see in these narratives? A thinking educator. What do we learn about these children? We have a nine months-old child playing with kitchen cupboards. We can choose to see her simply as 'happily occupied' or with a richer perspective, our assessment gaze can be 'seeing thinking' and valuing her use of memory as a tool to organise her play. We also have a 15 months-old box organiser. In being thoughtful about her play we have evidence that, barely a year old, she is pre-planning her activity and problem-solving as issues arise.

As Drummond has noted,

When educators assess children's learning, their intention is to find out, to make sense of what they discover and to use what has been learnt to facilitate ongoing learning. In this

way, assessment becomes part of the day to day process of teaching and learning. It is an integral rather than separate activity in the curriculum development process. (2003: 14)

With informed analysis of children engaging with each other and the environment, data are generated that can contribute to further curriculum decisions. In the cases above, both girls could be offered the time and space for other opportunities to engage with these materials, as they are fruitful sources for thinking and experimentation.

Sharing responsibility for assessment

In addition to valuing children's perspectives and engaging families in conversations that lead to understandings about children, staff members benefit from a shared orientation to assessment. A team approach to assessment can be evolved over time. There will be different staff who value and recognise ('see') different things, relating in different ways to each of the children, contributing to varying books/formats/records. This variation has implications for the individual staff member, for children and for the programme. Considering these opportunities can be a worthwhile focus for any staff group, as is shown in Janet's story below.

Janet speaks: Team assessment

Over the years, various forms of team or 'adult assessments' have been undertaken in our setting. Recently we have – as a school – focused on a particular area, using an action research methodology. One year it was 'What is assessment?'; another year 'What is our knowledge of mathematics in early childhood?' Another was 'What is the role of an iPad in an early childhood program?' At times when reviewing our reflective program documents, we have noticed a silence, an absence which needs our attention. Recently we realised that we had a strong focus on puzzles in the older room. Quite rightly we were celebrating the achievement of these four and five year-olds who were completing 500 piece jigsaws. However, it was apparent that pretend play as a focus for our observation and writing was marginalised. Studying our archive documents (records of pedagogical documentation) enabled us to redirect our 'gaze' and externalised thinking to the importance of writing and thinking about pretend play as a pedagogical emphasis.

Conclusion

So where does this discussion leave us? Assessment is about more than measurement or policy outcomes. It is a thinking process related to teaching intentionally which has the potential to highlight inclusion, thinking, creativity, family and linguistic diversity, the building of relationships and social justice issues. It has ethical constraints and both individual and community responsibilities.

Swaffield has written that ‘... assessment and its issues cross national boundaries. Indeed, there is much to be learned from practice developed in other countries and the way that educators elsewhere have responded to policy challenges’ (2008: xii). It is hoped that these Australian examples resonate with people elsewhere.

Critical activity

Think of a child you know. Watch (or remember) a short event (an exploration or interaction) which demonstrated that child’s curiosity, inventiveness or problem-solving. Write a narrative in the style of the vignettes in this chapter. From the perspective of assessing this child’s growth and learning, what have you learned about this child?

Further reading

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