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Assessing Four-year-old Children's Learning:
New Zealand Early Childhood Teachers' Purposes, Practices
and Knowledge

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Education
at Massey University, Manawatū,
New Zealand.

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2018

Abstract

Assessment is a core element of quality teaching and learning experiences for all children enrolled in early childhood education settings. This study explored New Zealand early childhood teachers' purposes, practices and knowledge related to assessing four-year-old children's learning. Understanding teachers' beliefs related to the assessment of four-year olds is particularly important for supporting effective transition to school and continuity between early childhood and school contexts.

To investigate teachers' assessment purposes, practices and knowledge, a mixed methods sequential research design was developed. Phase one involved a nationwide survey of early childhood teachers, while phase two involved 14 key informant interviews with teachers representing nine different service types. Interview questions were derived from the survey results. Interviewees were asked to complete the survey and to share three pieces of assessment documentation. Descriptive statistics and thematic coding were utilised to analyse the data gathered. Findings from both phases were used to answer the study's research questions.

Findings demonstrated that teachers recognised the important role of assessment but their assessment knowledge, purposes and practices varied widely. Teachers favoured informal methods and focussed on sharing information with others as a primary purpose for assessment. Teachers' knowledge of assessment was predominantly developed through their experiences in the sector, thereby conserving established assessment practices. Learning stories were found to dominate teachers' assessment practices, which

focused on specific aspects of children's learning. Assessing four-year-old children's learning was considered to be important in relation to transition to school, though challenges associated with sharing assessment information were repeatedly identified.

The findings of this study, along with those of extant research, are of concern because New Zealand early childhood teachers' assessment purposes, practices and knowledge in relation to assessing four-year-olds appear to be constrained relative to international recommendations for quality assessment in early childhood. One implication is that teachers need additional support to develop their knowledge of assessment and understand its multiple purposes. The development of a repertoire of assessment tools would further assist the advancement of teachers' assessment practices. Early childhood and new entrant teachers need support to develop their understandings of each other's assessment methods, so that methods with appropriate fit for purpose can be used to promote children's successful transition to school. Continued research, professional development and initial teacher education need to play a key role in challenging current rhetoric and misunderstandings around assessment.

Acknowledgements

While I am proudly the author of this thesis, the journey to its completion has not been a solitary one. I will be forever grateful to everyone who has been a part of my journey: teachers, fellow doctoral students, participants, colleagues, supervisors, friends and family.

To the teachers I have worked alongside, thank you for the inspiration, guidance and mentoring you have each shown me. Thanks also to the doctoral students whom I have had the pleasure to meet and share the journey with and for the support and encouragement you have all offered. To the study participants, thank you for taking the time to contribute to this study and for the amazing work you do every day with young children.

Thank you very much to my colleagues at Massey University, both past and present, for your ongoing interest, support, belief and inspiration. The many conversations we have had about assessment and research has reinforced my interest in the topic, motivated me when things were challenging and provided opportunities to clarify my thinking. To Natalie Cook, Penny Smith and Chrissy Lepper, thank you for your confidence in believing that I could do this, without which I may never have started, and for your ongoing interest and encouragement.

To my friends, thank you for checking on my progress and your encouragement, and I look forward to spending more time with you! To Don and Gail Wills thank you for sharing your piece of paradise with me as a place to focus on my study

or to relax when I needed too. Thanks also to the Williams family for providing a space to escape from my study.

My sincere thanks must go to my supervisors: Dr Peter Rawlins, Professor Claire McLachlan and Dr Tara McLaughlin. Your willingness to share your time, knowledge and expertise, to discuss ideas, to offer suggestions and guidance and to provide unlimited support is greatly appreciated. Thanks most of all for believing in my ability to succeed.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Alister and Jeannette Cameron. Thank you to Dad for suggesting that I needed 'a floppy hat' and to Mum for your help with proof reading. You have both always encouraged my need to learn more, while being wonderful role models of what is possible when you work hard.

*This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers,
Royce Chisnall and Frances Cameron,
who showed me how children should be treasured.*

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