

Commentary Paper

Reviewing the Reviewers: Commentary on the Education Review Office's Evaluation of Assessment in Early Childhood Settings

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Abstract

The Education Review Office recently undertook a review of assessment practices in early childhood centres: The *Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education*. The report endorses the use of Learning Stories and is critical of educators who do not follow the guidelines on assessment in *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te Pae*. This paper argues that it is inappropriate for ERO to sanction an approach to assessment that is not adequately supported by research evidence. Moreover, early childhood centres that rely on the assessment techniques outlined in the ERO report may gather information that is of limited value for assessing essential areas of learning and development. The assessment techniques favoured by ERO may also be of limited value for planning future learning experiences or for showing changes in children's learning and development over time.

Introduction

The Education Review Office (ERO) is the government department responsible for evaluating the quality of care and education in New Zealand schools and early childhood services. ERO undertakes a regular cycle of inspection and reporting on the performance of every school and early childhood centre in the country (Education Review Office, 2008). The findings of ERO are publicly available and can have a significant impact on the reputation and operation of an education service. When concerns about an early childhood centre are identified by ERO, the centre may be required to remedy these within a certain time period or face the possibility of closure.

ERO has an essential role in ensuring that all children are provided with the highest possible levels of care and education. The role of ERO is particularly important for early childhood settings because parents and caregivers need to be assured that they can have a high level of trust in the educators they leave their children with. The significance of the work of ERO means that it is important that valid criteria are used to evaluate the quality of early childhood education. In this regard, I suggest in this article that ERO needs to re-examine the advice that it is providing on assessment in early childhood settings.

In 2007, ERO produced a report titled *The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education*. The report is based on the reviews of early childhood services that were carried out in Terms 3 and 4 of 2006. Altogether 389 services were reviewed in this time (239 Education and Care Services, 101 Free Kindergartens, and 49 Playcentres). The ERO report provides little detail about data collection methods apart from noting that information was

gathered through observations, examination of documentation (including self-reviews, strategic plans and annual reports), and discussion with licensees, managers, teachers, children, parents, whanau (extended family), and the community, as appropriate. This very general description of data collection leaves open the possibility that quite different types and amounts of information were gathered from different services. A more detailed account of data collection is needed in order for ERO to show that the findings of *The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education* are based on valid and credible evidence.

The framework for the ERO report is organised around the following five questions:

1. How well do educators develop and implement assessment policies and practices for the service?
2. To what extent does assessment practice reflect the four principles of *Te Whāriki*?
3. How well is children's learning and development reflected in assessment?
4. How well does assessment information inform learning in the service?
5. To what extent do assessment practices contribute to ongoing self-review?

In this article, I comment on a number of ERO's findings in each of these areas and I question a number of assumptions the Education Review Office has made in its conclusions about the quality of assessment in early childhood settings.

Assessment Policies and Practice: How well do educators develop and implement assessment policies and practices for the service?

One of the criteria that ERO used in its review was "Assessment practices are based on sound research" (p.8). In relation to this criterion, ERO "investigated the extent to which assessment was based on current early childhood theory" (p.11). However, the only documents that ERO refer to are *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a) the *Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices* (DOPs) (Ministry of Education, 1996b) and *Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007). Almost two-thirds of services were found to base their assessment practices on these documents.

These documents represent curriculum policy and assessment guidelines in New Zealand and it is therefore to be expected that they would be made use of by centres. It is pertinent to note, however, that the documents are only a small, and not necessarily representative, sample of international literature on early childhood. It is unfortunate that ERO did not make use of the opportunities created in its investigation to examine a wider range of perspectives on curriculum and assessment in early childhood education. For example, internationally, early childhood curriculum documents exist that are much more specific than *Te Whāriki* in relation to the types of knowledge, skills, and experiences that may be beneficial for children in the early years (e.g., California Department of Education, 2008; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). The holistic approach used in *Te Whāriki* expresses many admirable principles but falls short on providing guidelines on essential areas of learning (see Hedges & Cullen, 2005).

Kei Tua o te Pae, the early childhood exemplars, consist largely of attempts to use one particular approach to assessment, namely Learning Stories (see Carr 1998a, 2001), to portray the learning of children in early childhood settings. The Learning Stories approach requires teachers to observe children and then write narrative stories that interpret the learning that occurred in particular contexts. Learning Stories have been promoted as a way

to assess the learning dispositions of young children (Carr, 2001), but there is considerable confusion over what learning dispositions are and whether they can be assessed (see Sadler, 2002).

Learning Stories are only one of many possible ways of assessing young children's learning. Rather than focusing on *Kei Tua o te Pae* and Learning Stories, it would have been valuable for ERO to have taken a wider approach that examined international research on assessment in early childhood education. Interestingly, many recent texts on the assessment of young children make no mention of the Learning Stories approach to assessment. (e.g., Bagnato, 2007; Beaty, 2005; Brassard & Boehm, 2007; Hobart & Frankel, 2004; Martin, 2007, National Research Council, 2008).

There is some case study evidence that Learning Stories, when carried out by an experienced researcher, can be a useful tool for describing incidents of children's learning in particular settings (see Carr, 1998b, 2001). There is, however, currently little empirical evidence that the widespread use of Learning Stories in early childhood settings by educators can be justified in terms of gains for children's learning and development. It therefore appears to be premature for ERO to be sanctioning the use of Learning Stories to the exclusion of other methods of assessment.

Reflecting the Four Principles of Te Whāriki: To what extent does assessment practice reflect the four principles of Te Whāriki?

ERO (2007) evaluated whether assessment practice reflected the "principles of Te Whāriki in relation to evidence that:

- children's holistic development was reflected in assessment practice;
- children and their families were involved in assessment practice;
- children were given feedback on their learning; and
- children's learning was captured in context to their relationships with people, places and things" (pp.15-16).

ERO found that "nearly two-thirds of services reflected children's holistic development in their assessment practice" (p.16). ERO is non-specific, however, when describing what holistic development is and how it can be assessed. Holistic assessment is defined only in general terms (in the glossary at the end of the report) as "information about children's knowledge, skills, dispositions, attitudes, and cultural dimensions" (p.41). Yet, how educators are supposed to gather ongoing information about these areas using the approach exemplified in *Kei Tua o te Pae* is unclear. Nowhere in the "key guiding documents" that ERO refers to (*Te Whāriki*, *Kei Tua o te Pae*, and the *DOPs*) is there clear guidance about how often to assess individual children and what key areas of learning and development should be assessed to inform the notion of holistic learning and development.

ERO is critical of the third of early childhood services that "did not reflect multiple aspects of children's learning and development in assessment information" (p.16). ERO comments that in these services "some assessments were still highly descriptive of children's learning over time and place, and lacked higher-level analysis of children's learning over time and in a range of situations, reflecting educators' limited understanding of *Te Whāriki*" (p.17). This statement, however, would appear to be unfair to these educators, given that *Te Whāriki* does not actually provide clear guidance on what ERO refers to as "higher-level analysis of children's learning over time and in a range of situations" (p.17).

The ERO report also comments on the effectiveness of services in providing feedback to children. ERO considers that “feedback to children about their learning and development enhances their senses of themselves as capable and confident learners” (p.18). ERO claims that “just over half of services were enhancing children’s sense of themselves through feedback about their learning” (p.18). It is unclear, however, how ERO determined that “children’s sense of themselves” was actually being enhanced through feedback. To support such a statement, ERO would first need to define what is meant by “children’s sense of themselves as capable and confident learners” (p.18) and, second, to examine how this varies across individual children in relation to factors such as age and sociocultural background. Having defined children’s “sense of themselves”, ERO would then need to determine whether it was possible to assess this for individual children. To show that feedback was indeed “enhancing children’s sense of themselves” ERO would need to undertake detailed observations, and analysis of the impact of specific types of feedback on individual children’s “sense of themselves” over periods of time.

It may be argued that ERO could not be expected to gather this type of evidence in the small amount of time available when reviewing a centre. The point, however, is that it is unreasonable for ERO to suggest that about half of the early childhood services were not using feedback to enhance children’s “sense of themselves as capable and confident learners” (p.18) when there is insufficient evidence to support such a statement.

Reflecting Children’s Learning and Development: How well is children’s learning and development reflected in assessment?

According to ERO, “assessment that captures the breadth of children’s learning and development, including skills, dispositions, parents’ aspirations, and children’s interests provides a picture of the whole child” (p.21). ERO found that about half of early childhood services demonstrated this breadth of assessment.

How ERO came to such a conclusion is unclear. Assessing the breadth of children’s learning and development is a very complex task but one that ERO only describes in very general terms. ERO does not specify which broad areas of learning and development were actually assessed and how often. A significant challenge for early childhood services is that the key guiding documents that ERO refers to in relation to assessment (*Te Whāriki*, *Kei Tua o te Pae*, and the *DOPs*) do not provide clear guidance on how to assess children’s learning and development in specific areas (e.g., physical development, language acquisition), let alone the full breadth of children’s learning and development. ERO promotes a holistic approach to assessment but this can result in essential areas being overlooked. While it is accepted that children learn in a holistic way, this does not mean that educators should not make use of a framework that subdivides learning and development into particular domains of development or interest.

Furthermore, if children’s learning and development is to be assessed by educators, then it is crucial that the assessments are trustworthy. One way of gaining confidence in an assessment method is to consider its reliability (i.e., the stability of the measure) and its validity (i.e., whether the assessment measures what it claims to measure). Reliability and validity are fundamental tenets in educational assessment (Brassard & Boehm, 2007) but ERO does not mention either of these concepts anywhere in its report on the quality of assessment. This is unfortunate because educators need to be assured that the assessments they use are trustworthy.

Some may consider that the concepts of reliability and validity are more relevant to traditional educational measures and that assessments such as Learning Stories are a qualitative approach that should be considered in relation to other criteria (e.g., Carr, 2001). However, credibility of the assessment is important whether it be a conventional measure or a more innovative approach. I have noted elsewhere that there are concerns about the credibility of Learning Stories, even when they are evaluated against the criteria more appropriate to qualitative assessment (e.g., “plausibility” or “accountability”: see Blaiklock, 2008).

Another area that ERO comments on is whether assessment practices acknowledge “increasing complexity” and show “the progress of each child as they develop competence and confidence over time” (p.22). Similar to the case for breadth of learning, however, the problem that educators face is that the Ministry of Education does not provide them with clear guidelines on how to assess the increasing complexity of children’s learning and development over time. *Te Whāriki* provides little information on the typical patterns of learning and development that many children show as they grow and develop. *Kei Tua o te Pae* provides very few examples of individual children showing changes in learning and development. Furthermore, *Kei Tua o te Pae* seems to undervalue the significance of age-related developmental patterns by seldom mentioning a child’s age in the exemplars. Publications on Learning Stories claim that progress in children’s learning can be shown through stories becoming “longer” “wider” and “more complex or deeper” (Carr, 1998a, pp. 17-18) but the adequacy of using Learning Stories to assess changes in learning is yet to be established.

Assessment Informing Learning: How well does assessment information inform learning in the service?

The ERO report examines whether educators make use of assessment in order to plan and provide appropriate learning experiences for children. ERO found that “in just over half the services, educators were using assessment to plan for, and respond to, children’s learning ...” whereas “in just under half the services, educators were not making useful links between assessment and planning. Educators did not regularly participate in reflective discussions and there was little sharing of observations and analysis of children’s learning” (p.25).

A difficulty with ERO’s findings, however, is that ERO does not specify which areas are included within the phrase, “children’s learning”. As noted, young children are learning and developing across a myriad of interconnected areas. ERO does not explain whether they expected centres to be assessing in any or all of these areas. Nor does ERO explain whether assessments were being made in any or all of the curriculum strands of *Te Whāriki* (well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration).

Further, while ERO promotes the use of Learning Stories, publications on Learning Stories (e.g., Carr, 1998a, 2001) do not provide clear guidelines on how often children might be assessed. Given the lack of guidance, centres may vary considerably in how frequently they produce Learning Stories. For example, a common practice may be to provide one Learning Story per month for each child. Such a Learning Story may provide a teacher’s interpretation of some of the learning that occurs within a particular incident at a particular time and place, but this is only a small representation of the learning that is occurring in a child’s life.

Hence, using a Learning Story of a particular incident may be of limited value for planning the wide range of experiences that are needed to enrich a child’s learning. An examination of the Learning Stories in *Kei Tua o te Pae* shows that the plans for how to extend a child’s

learning (included in the “What next?” section of the Learning Story) often relate to what a teacher could do during the specific interaction or shortly after. It is not necessary, however, to write a Learning Story for a teacher to reflect on responding to a child “in the moment”. It is possible that the gap between the teacher observation and the writing of the Learning Story may mean that the optimal time for responding has passed. For planning future experiences, it is valuable to gather information on children’s interests and learning. However, this information does not always need to be gathered within a Learning Story framework. Indeed, teachers may be able to gather a greater variety of information on children by the regular recording of brief observations and anecdotes across a range of contexts rather than through the infrequent production of Learning Stories. Information gathered through observations and anecdotes can still be discussed with other staff, children, parents, and whanau in order to gain additional perspectives. (See Podmore, 2006, for further discussion of the use of a range of assessment techniques in early childhood education).

Contributing to Self Review: To what extent do assessment practices contribute to ongoing self-review?

The final section in the ERO report examines whether early childhood services made effective use of assessment information in ongoing reviews of their programmes. ERO found that “about half the services were using assessment information about children’s learning to inform programme development” (p.28) and that fewer than half the services provided evidence that educators were using assessment information to enhance the quality of their interactions with children.

I contend that one difficulty with these comments is that it is not yet clear that the type of assessment information that ERO looks favourably on, in particular the use of Learning Stories as exemplified in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, is adequate for the purposes of informing programme development and enhancing the quality of interactions between educators and children.

Learning Stories may provide insights into particular incidents but neither *Kei Tua o te Pae* nor other guidelines on Learning Stories provide a clear framework to ensure that centres are gathering the range of valid evidence required for a useful programme review. A fundamental area to consider within a programme review is whether the programme enhances children’s learning over time. I suggested earlier that Learning Stories are insufficient for assessing the richness of children’s learning or for assessing changes in learning over time. Hence, the value of Learning Stories for informing a programme review is limited.

The information available from Learning Stories may also be of limited value for enhancing the quality of interactions between educators and children. Quality interactions are crucial to the quality of an early childhood programme and there is much research showing the importance of teacher interactions for children’s learning across a wide range of areas (e.g., Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003). Learning Stories, however, are designed to provide a teacher’s interpretation of a child’s learning in particular incidents. Publications on Learning Stories do not provide educators with clear guidance on how to evaluate the effectiveness of their interactions in these situations. A more effective approach to assessing the quality of interactions would be to make use of information from research on the effectiveness of specific interaction techniques for enhancing learning (e.g., Dickinson, Darrow, & Tinubu, 2007; Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2004, 2006).

Conclusion

The Education Review Office has a very powerful role in monitoring the quality of early childhood education services in New Zealand. I have argued in this article, however, that ERO is misguided in its somewhat narrow approach to the assessment of young children. ERO's report, *The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education*, emphasises the value of a particular assessment method, namely Learning Stories as exemplified in *Kei Tua o te Pae*. The effectiveness of the widespread use of this approach for assessing and enhancing children's learning is yet to be supported by research.

I have argued that the guidelines on assessment that are promoted by ERO (in *Te Whāriki*, the *DOPs*, and *Kei Tua o te Pae*) provide only general information that is not sufficient for assessing the complexities of children's learning and development, nor for showing changes in learning and development over time. The type of assessment information that ERO favours is therefore of limited value for planning future learning experiences for children. The assessment information is also of limited value for informing programme reviews or for enhancing the quality of interactions between educators and children. Yet these are the outcomes that ERO seeks to promote in its report.

Innovation in the assessment of young children is important. Researchers should continue to investigate whether new approaches to assessment, such as Learning Stories, can help to further our understanding of children's learning. At this point, however, it is inappropriate for ERO to sanction the widespread use of Learning Stories, and ignore other methods, when there is currently insufficient research evidence to support this assessment practice.

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