

Original Research Paper

Playcentre Parent Educators' Assessment Practice

Brent Mawson

The University of Auckland

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Abstract

While research abounds on parenting and on teaching, the practice of parents as educators within more or less formal educational settings is an area in which little research has been done. Hence, information on complex practices such as assessment of children by parent educators in early childhood settings has been similarly scarce, yet the role of assessment is regarded critical to teaching and learning. The Playcentre movement in New Zealand is unique in the degree to which parents are involved in the teaching process. This article examines the assessment practice of 16 Playcentre parent educators. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with the parent educators and analysis of the learning portfolios of 26 children. Assessment of children's learning was focused on their social competence, in particular cooperation and friendship. The key influences in developing the parent educators' knowledge and understanding of assessment were the relationships and processes within the Playcentre and a strong community of practice was clearly evident.

Introduction

This article presents findings from an interpretivist case study conducted in an Auckland Playcentre that focussed on the parent educators' assessment beliefs and practices. Playcentres are unique to New Zealand. They are sessional, early childhood education services run as parent cooperatives in which teams of trained parents take on the role of educators in the centre (Manning, 2008). Each of the 492 Playcentres in New Zealand is autonomous, and is affiliated to the New Zealand Playcentre Federation (NZPF) through one of 33 regional associations. The NZPF oversees the delivery of the Playcentre Diploma of Early Childhood and Adult Education. Ministry of Education funding is provided for Playcentres that meet the minimum supervision standards and minimum qualifications for group supervision. A higher (quality) funding rate is paid if one of three options is met. Playcentre parents are also eligible for the 20 Hours funding subsidy (Ministry of Education, 2011).

While there are other international movements with a focus on parent involvement, such as playgroups in Britain and Australia and cooperative preschools in North America, none involve the same degree of parent involvement in teaching (Manning, 2008). Playcentre parents can be involved in the teaching process in one of three ways. Sessions may be led by a paid supervisor who is an experienced parent and has completed at least a medium level

Playcentre qualification. Two other parent educators with the appropriate level of training complete the team for the session. Parents attend sessions up to once per week and may leave their child for other sessions. This approach is most common in South Island Playcentres and some North Island Playcentres. A second approach has teams of parents responsible for particular sessions. The parents may hold a range of qualifications to meet the Playcentre specific licensing agreement, with one delegated the responsibility of being the team leader. A group supervision approach, which was used in the case study Playcentre, is most common in the Auckland area. This requires all parents to attend most of the sessions that their child attends. In all cases a parent or other caregiver attends with a child under two and a half (Woodhams & Woodhams, 2008).

All Playcentre parent educators are encouraged to enrol in the Playcentre Diploma in Early Childhood and Adult Education. The diploma consists of six courses covering: introducing Playcentre; the Playcentre way; Playcentre sessions; Playcentre practice; Playcentre in context; and the completion of the Diploma. Apart from course one, which has only one module, the courses have between three and five modules within them. Course three is seen as the goal for most parent educators and few complete levels four and above. A team of parent educators who collectively hold six levels of the diploma (e.g. 4+1+1; 3+2+1; 3+3) must be present at every Playcentre session.

There is a growing body of literature concerning the history and philosophy of the Playcentre movement in New Zealand (e.g. Manning, 2008; Mitchell, 2006; Stover, 1997, 1998a, 1998b). Research has also investigated the development and implementation of a quality management system to satisfy the requirements of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (Keesing-Styles, 1999) and the future needs of the Playcentre movement (Woodhams & Woodhams, 2008) but much less has been written about Playcentre parent educators' practices, with only minimal research focussing on parents as educators (Manning, 2008).

Much of the evidence on Playcentre parent educator's assessment practice is self-reported (e.g. Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006). In Mitchell's (2008) report on the results of the 2007 New Zealand Council for Educational Research national survey for Early Childhood Education services Playcentre parent educators made up 16% (64) of the 402 teacher responses. Some data reporting compares teacher responses from the six types of licensed early childhood education services surveyed. Mitchell notes significant lower-than-average use of assessment data by Playcentre teacher/educators to develop individual plans and relevant programmes for groups and individual children, and to evaluate the programme and daily practice compared to the other services surveyed. Above average responses were found with regard to providing feedback to children, with the children's decision as to what should be recorded in their portfolios and how often they revisited their portfolios. Playcentre educator's responses also indicated a below average use of the assessment exemplars contained in *Kei Tua o Te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009). Ninety percent of the Playcentre parent educators who responded to the survey believed that one of their main achievements in the period 2003 to 2007 was an improvement in their assessment and evaluation practices.

Two recent research projects have focussed more directly on the practice of Playcentre educators as part of a Centre of Innovation. First, research in Wilton Playcentre (van Wijk, Simmonds, Cubey, & Mitchell, 2006) investigated parent educator pedagogy with a particular focus on the ability to recognise and respond to children's schema and learning dispositions. Issues relating to the maintenance of quality and continuity between sessions and the nature of parent engagement were also included in this research project. The authors

found that knowing about, carefully observing, and identifying children's schemas enabled them to "understand children's behaviour, support their schematic interests, and extend their learning" (p. ii). Second, Manning and Loveridge (2009) identified a link between a parent educator's sense of belonging and their sense of agency and level of participation.

Given this link, the research questions were developed jointly between the researcher and the participants with a view to providing evidence on which to refine and improve assessment practices. The principal focus was the identification and documentation of the children's developing competencies through the use of learning stories.

Learning stories are a narrative form of assessment focussing on dispositions for learning. The methodology was developed by Carr (2001) to provide a form of assessment practice appropriate to the early childhood curriculum *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The use of learning stories was validated by the Ministry of Education's early childhood assessment exemplars *Kei Tua o Te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009) and the Education Review Office (2007). Although the learning story approach has mostly been discussed in very positive terms (e.g. Hatherly & Sands, 2002; Lee & Carr, 2002) Blaiklock (2008, 2009) has challenged the hegemonic status it has attained.

Playcentres would seem to have many of the characteristics of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1999). There are well established ways of working that are reified within the Playcentre Diploma in Early Childhood and Adult Education and the existing practice that new parent educators enter. The mentoring of new members is an important role for more experienced parent educators and the new members are expected to increase their level of participation and qualification over time.

Methods

The research described here was an interpretivist (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) case study of the assessment practices of 16 parent educators at a central Auckland Playcentre. An interpretivist approach is "the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds" (Neuman, 2003, p. 76). All the parent educators were involved in the Playcentre programme on a rostered basis and were also on the management committee of the Playcentre. There were 31 families involved in the Playcentre; all the parents were invited to participate. Sixteen parent educators, all mothers, chose to participate in the research project.

It was expected that the research would provide evidence of current beliefs and practices, and indicate strategies for the enhancement of the assessment of children's learning. The initial stage of the project comprised semi-structured interviews with the parent educators to characterise their existing understandings about the nature of children's competence and how this was documented. Sixteen parent educators were interviewed. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. The semi-structured interview covered their reasons for choosing Playcentre, the training they had undertaken, their familiarity with learning stories and *Kei Tua o Te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009), the planning and assessment practices within the Playcentre, and their own assessment practice.

The portfolios of 26 children were analysed for the period February 2008–August 2009 using a slightly modified version (see Table 1) of the list developed by the *Competent Children* research project (Wylie & Thompson, 2003). The list was used to measure the frequency of documented references to the 13 competencies. All six of the weekly sessions were attended once to gain an understanding of the particular social world in which the

assessment practice was occurring. A comparison was then made between espoused beliefs and practices and actual practice. An important part of the process was meeting with the parents to discuss the findings and to gain their understandings and explanations of the data. The discussion was recorded and transcribed. The meeting also served as the starting point for their discussions on how to develop and enhance the Playcentre's planning and assessment processes.

Ethical considerations

Research with young children poses a number of important ethical issues that need to be addressed. As the children were not observed and the actual play not recorded by me, most of the usual ethical issues were absent. Although I had the parents' permission to read and analyse their children's portfolios, whenever possible, I also asked the children if it was alright before reading them. All information from the portfolios was aggregated and only aggregated information was given to parents and used by me in presentations.

It was also important to respect the rights of the parent educators and to ensure that the aim of enhancing their assessment practice was met. The first aim was achieved by only using the parent edited and approved transcripts of their interviews and providing them with copies of all drafts of the article for their comment and feedback. The feedback discussion provided a researcher-mediated forum to examine the existing planning and assessment processes and to set the agenda for further discussion.

Pseudonyms have been used for the parent educators in this article. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Findings

Perceptions and experiences of assessment

Learning stories were the predominant method of assessing and documenting (in the children's portfolios) the children's learning. There was quite a wide range, from two to twenty, in the number of learning stories individual parent educators wrote during each ten-week term. There was a clear relationship between the time an individual had been a parent educator within the Playcentre and the number of learning stories they wrote. The majority of the sixteen parent educators interviewed said they wrote between six to eight stories a term.

There was quite a range of responses regarding which children they chose to focus on when documenting children's learning during a Playcentre session, but most parent educators said they involved their own children in over 50% of the learning stories they wrote. The data indicated that parents were more likely to involve their own child because either they found it easier to assess their child, and/or because they were keen to use the documentation to learn more about their child.

Rachel said, ". . . I'm going to start writing learning stories about my own children first because to me that's where the most valuable thing is." In a similar vein Anna said, "I can't help but write some learning stories for my children because I know their learning better and I want to remember it and for them to look over it." Susan also saw this as important: "the most valuable ones is the ones that you do on your own children really because you know them and I really try and encourage people, newer members to do it on their own children because it's so much more meaningful as well."

For some parent educators there were particular areas within the Playcentre in which they preferred to work. Georgia identified two such areas, "I don't think I've ever found myself in family play for instance and I also very rarely find myself in the music area." For Frances, it was the sandpit: "I'm not a fan of the sandpit I have to say, it's not my thing."

The discussions also revealed the focus of documentation for parents. The majority of parent educators interviewed identified social relationships/interactions as the area on which they most focussed when documenting children's play. Janet said, "Social aspects definitely interest me, and are a strong part of my documentation." Celma stated, ". . . it is the social interaction. I try to grab what they're saying, as much as I can, and record that . . . a lot of it is social stuff for me." For Susan this was also the focus, "yes, social. When children are really involved in their play I try and capture that." Two of the parent educators who focused on social interactions did indicate some concern about the balance. Rachel said, "I think probably social roles, I think that probably a lot of us view the children through that lens a lot. You know, how they relate to each other, who they're playing with, what they're doing and I think that you know learning strategies we probably don't focus a lot on learning strategies." Anna made a similar comment, "Yeah so I do focus on the social aspect and then in the back of my mind sometimes I worry about the numeracy and literacy."

There was some concern that pressure to write learning stories resulted in documentation that was not authentic. Tyler said, "I think the weakness is that people do it because they think it's an obligatory thing to do rather than something that they actually see value in terms of literacy and numeracy." Celma had a similar concern, "Even though we're meant to be doing it, every kid gets two a term, sometimes I have written learning stories or documentations for kids that is nothing special, just because they need to be ticked off." Anna expressed that "Every child has to have a couple of learning stories so sometimes I find its not particularly authentic, you'll be looking for a child and think I'll grab that because she hasn't had a learning story."

Two main sources informed the parent educators' assessment practices. The first of these was the Playcentre Diploma of Early Childhood and Adult Education. Assessment of children's learning is covered in the first module of course two. Parent educators who had completed Course Two had differing views on the value of the module for their practice. For example, Janet had found the module of some value: "At Course Two level there was a paper on assessment and evaluation. And over two nights we talked about learning stories and assessment. It gave me a bit more confidence to write a learning story. I don't think I'd really written anything substantial before then." Patsy was less positive, "Not useful at all apart from the one course that taught you how to write your learning story, which you probably could have learnt in half an hour if someone had sat down with you. So no, I don't find the training useful at all." Anna also did not feel very empowered by her experience, "Course Two is attending a couple of nights and really that's all that there was, a couple of nights. It might have been one or two, I can't remember. Oh two, two nights on looking at notice, recognise, respond and really given a booklet of learning dispositions of what's the other part, *Te Whaariki*. Then after that there is no support. It's just you write them, no-one ever critiques them." Jordan was more positive, "I think generally quite good, especially Course Two in terms of learning stories and play set up and communication."

The few parent educators who had completed Course Three modules articulated a sense of great value and significant change. Susan commented "I think probably in Course Three I started to learn something new. I did find it really valuable." Frances made this quite explicit:

Course Three, it became more comprehensive. I think when I first started I had no idea what I was meant to be looking for or what it would be appropriate to record or the language to use to record it and so in the middle of [the] course there was a model, Notice, Recognise and Respond. It was at that point that it became a bit more clear and I became more confident in doing it.

Knowledge gained from other parent educators both on an individual basis and through the regular planning and evaluation meetings within the Playcentre was the most important source for the parent educators interviewed. Encouragement rather than practical help seemed to have been the usual experience and there was a feeling that it was expected that new members in the Playcentre would learn by observing more experienced parent educators modelling documentation of children's learning. Patsy commented, "Yeah, if you ask them they will give you as much help as you want and I think it's a case of finding the time because it's always so busy to get the help that you need." Cahlin had received more structured support; "I had a buddy when I first started. Although at that stage you're not really expected to write learning stories. You can if you want to, of course, and if you want to, you can just go and ask someone for help." There was recognition among the more experienced parent educators that the induction of new members into the assessment practices of early childhood education was important.

A lot of what happens now is role modelling, and also too with the whole idea of being part of a duty team there is an expectation that you will write learning stories. Now when new members start at centre it's just part of the culture of our centre. People come in and they think, "Oh right, learning stories, well everyone else is doing them, I've got to do them too (Tyler).

There was a general consensus that the end-of session evaluation meetings were both valuable and effective, although continuity from session to session was seen as a challenge.

And then at the end of session meetings we're hopefully all aware of those interests and ideas, and the next week's planning should tie into those. Many of the ideas for the next session arise from activities that have happened on the current session. The problem with that is by the time next week's session comes along the children may have moved on; be interested in doing something totally different. The other downfall of these session-based ideas is that they aren't always carried through, due to adults and/or children with an interest in an activity being away (Janet).

I think it is working better. I think everyone is actually looking at the sheets now and setting up activities that they should be. I've noticed in the last couple of weeks they are actually setting up or we all are setting up what we've said we'll set up the week before and it is great (Jordan).

These meetings were also regarded as a challenge. For instance, the presence of children was seen to be distracting, often leading to disjointed meetings. Georgia's comment was typical, "I find them a bit challenging in terms of the fact that the kids are all really tired and it's often a bit manic and lots of noise and people needing to sit on knees and crying and not wanting to have mummy sitting there talking to other parents." The superficial nature of the discussion and the constraints imposed by the structure and timing of the meetings was also of concern to some parent educators.

They could be a lot more effective. We haven't yet evolved to the level of dialogue and discussion about what actually happens on session that I think would be really beneficial to our planning. We tend to still talk about things at a surface level, and people are very distracted because kids are, you know, coming and going, so half the time not all the group's there, gathered, at the time that the evaluation discussion is happening. We start talking about something and somebody else wanders off or comes in and we start again, so it can be quite disjointed and not everyone hears or shares all the information. At a surface level I think it's quite useful because it brings everyone together and most big issues get aired. But we never get to the really nitty gritty meaningful discussion that I would personally like to engage in. But then it's all time constraints as well. People are wanting to finish and go home by that point, and kids are getting tired (Tyler).

I don't find them the most effective way because there's usually such a lot going on in the meetings with children clambering all over us and demanding attention and conversations never quite get finished in terms of what children were doing or who was involved or how they were involved. You often come in at the tail end of a train of thought and it doesn't really get pursued. That's just a spark of here was an idea that was interesting (Frances).

Opinion about the value of the planning, evaluation and assessment meetings, in which all parents reported on the current interests and progress of their own children held twice a term, was varied and, in general, less positive than the views on the meetings held at the end of each session. There had been a change of format, from meeting in duty teams to meeting as a whole group, and the implications of this were still being worked through. Susan saw this as a beneficial development, "we plan as a whole group and I think that is probably the biggest most successful change because you're hearing what everyone else is going to do and kind of bounce off ideas." Two parents identified the common interests that emerged: "it does give you an overview of threads that are similar between the children" (Georgia) and "we've found some really common strong threads amongst the children across all the age groups" (Tessa). Sasha explained how this was built into the planning, "Children's interests are all brought to the meeting and almost compiled in a list. So we've got three or four, or maybe more areas that children are really showing interest in. Then we work that into the planning of each session."

Some reservations about the effectiveness of the planning, evaluation and assessment meetings were expressed. Janet saw continuity as a problem, "There could be more done in terms of using the learning stories as a planning tool, as a way to keep the continuity going for the children." Tyler also saw the link between the planning, evaluation and assessment meetings and the day-to-day sessions as not close enough.

I think that the PEA planning we're doing at the moment isn't feeding into the day-to-day sessions as much as it had in the past. I think it's because we're shifting more from that planned curriculum to a much more emergent approach. Because of the different levels of experience we have within Playcentre, there are a lot of different understandings I think about what emergent curriculum looks like and how that actually happens on a day-to-day basis. We need to get better at actually delving into the children's interests. We're trying to word questions on the assessment

forms in such a way that, that, depth of discussion about children's interests comes through. But people still like to fill the page with a list of things their child is interested in, rather than thinking it's okay to focus on one real interest and really look at it in depth and tease out why it's an interest and what it is specifically about that thing that is really of interest to the child.

In the previous six months a decision had been taken that instead of learning stories being put directly into children's portfolios they were placed into a collective portfolio that was left out in the Playcentre for everybody to access before later being refiled in the individual portfolios. The development of a common portfolio into which all the parent educators' learning stories were placed for a short period was seen as having a positive impact in developing general understanding of appropriate assessment practice. For instance Tyler said "I think, having the 'Our stories' folder on the table, does give people the opportunity to see a huge range of different types and styles of documentation as well." Georgia had found this folder useful for her practice, "I guess just through reading that I try to do things in a similar vein."

The Ministry of Education's (2004, 2007, 2009) early childhood assessment exemplars, *Kei Tua o Te Pae*, seem to have had little impact on informing and shaping these parent educators' assessment practices. Most interviewees were aware of the exemplars but only two of 16 had made any significant use of them. The parent educators' use of *Kei Tua o Te Pae* seemed dependent on having been to specific professional development workshops on the exemplars, as in-depth examination of them only occurred in Course Four of the Playcentre Diploma in Early Childhood and Adult Education, and very few parents enrol in and/or complete this course.

People get introduced to them in various workshops and courses but I don't think that very many people would actually go and really study them in-depth. It's really only in a Course Four module called "Children's Learning" that participants really look into the exemplars quite deeply as part of their assessment tasks. (Tyler)

For one parent educator, involvement in professional development on the exemplars had been a very positive experience. Susan said, "I have been to two *Kei Tua o Te Pae* workshops. I loved them, I really enjoyed them and I felt they were probably some of the most useful training that I'd done."

Documenting children's competencies

The portfolios of 26 children were analysed for the period February 2008 to July 2009 (see Table 1). Only the learning stories were analysed as the parent educators regarded them as being the most complete and representative data of their assessment processes. There were two other significant items in the portfolios. First, the children's planning, evaluation and assessment forms filled out by the parents twice a term. Second, items of artwork, without annotation, were included in the portfolios.

Table 1. Portfolio Documentation of Children’s Competency

Competency	Total N= 645	% Total
Social skills with peers	209	32.4
Social skills with adults	28	4.3
Science & technology concepts	83	12.9
Exploration of natural materials	74	11.5
Motor skills	73	11.3
Creative arts (Visual arts, dance, music)	46	7.1
Literacy (reading, writing)	38	5.9
Communication (receptive and expressive language use)	37	5.7
Mathematics	12	1.6
Perseverance	26	4
Curiosity	9	1.4
Individual responsibility (self-management)	6	0.9
Logical problem solving	4	0.6

The totals as shown in Table 1 markedly over-represent the number of actual learning experiences documented in this period because a particular learning experience could generate several records as the learning story might be inserted into the portfolio of every child in the group. If the whole group were involved, this one learning experience might be incorporated into as many as 20 different portfolios. Similarly one learning story might contain within it evidence of more than one competency. Some of the smaller totals are skewed because they have within them a high proportion of records relating to one or two children. Nineteen of the 38 learning stories documenting literacy learning (reading and writing) relate to only two children, and 17 of the 85 science and technology entries are for one child.

Three broad categories of documentation can be identified, social skills, curriculum knowledge and dispositions. One competency clearly stands out as a focus of interest for the parent educators, social skills with peers (32.4%). The data does not allow for precise breakdown of the particular aspects of social interaction, but the main focus of these stories was on how well the children played together and on the developing and cementing of friendship ties. The learning stories that focussed on the peer social skills also contained descriptions of activities that had potential development of other competencies within them; however these connections were not noted in the learning stories.

Discussion

As is the case with all early childhood settings there was a great deal of learning taking place in the Playcentre that was not documented. The aim of the research was to identify the aspects and episodes of learning the parent educators chose to document and to explore the beliefs underlying their practice. The documentation was seen as important for giving a concrete record of a child's progression of learning and as a basis for planning of future learning experiences within the Playcentre.

There was a healthy debate going on amongst the Playcentre parent educators at the time the research was undertaken about the usefulness of providing the older children with activities that might prepare them for school. This debate was not reflected in a focus on literacy activities in the documentation of children's learning. Virtually all of the curriculum areas in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) were covered in the portfolios of learning, but there was a significant lack of focus on mathematical use and competency (1.6%). Specific mention of dispositions to learn made up only 6.9% of documented learning, and perseverance (4%) was most likely to be written about.

Many of the parent educators were second or third generation Playcentre users. A key reason for choosing Playcentre was the social contacts that were created not only by the children in the Playcentre sessions, but between the families at other times. The interest in the peer relationships of their children expressed in the interviews appeared to influence the learning experiences they chose to document, with 36.7% of the learning stories documenting social interactions. The concern expressed by Anna about the lack of focus on the children's developing reading and writing and numeracy would seem to be justified, in that only 7.6% of the learning stories related to these competencies. As half the literacy learning (reading and writing) stories related to two girls, and half the numeracy stories to one boy, most of the 26 children did not have one learning story that was directly related to these competencies. However, had a different non-social lens been used by the parent educators then a much greater amount of children's developing numeracy and literacy skills would have been identified. It would be interesting to know if a similar focus of social interactions is the case in other early childhood education service types. If this is the case it would suggest that children's portfolios may not be seen as useful by New Entrant teachers who may be more concerned with evidence about knowledge of concepts related to the eight learning areas in the New Zealand curriculum. This discrepancy may be of concern if one of the functions of the portfolio is seen to be to ease the transition to school by providing evidence of prior learning.

The reported lower use and knowledge of *Kei Tua o Te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009) that Mitchell (2008) identified was also reflected in the responses of the Playcentre parent educators. It appeared from the interviews that significant focus on the notice, recognise, respond strategy that underpins the exemplars was not experienced until the level three courses. As those parent educators such as Susan who had a depth of experience with *Kei Tua o Te Pae* felt this had really enhanced their assessment processes, there may be a case for bringing these documents more strongly to the attention of parents as they enter into their journey as Playcentre parent educators. The lack of knowledge of *Kei Tua o Te Pae* may also account for the low focus on the dispositions of perseverance and curiosity even though dispositions underpinned the development of learning stories as a socio-cultural assessment strategy (Carr, 2001).

This Playcentre's policy of generating at least two learning stories on each child each term put pressure on the parent educators that at times led to inauthentic assessment practice. A number of the participants made the point that learning stories were written because they

were needed to meet the policy rather than because some meaningful learning had been identified. This pressure would seem to be across the early childhood sector. Blaiklock (2008, 2009) has addressed the limitations of the narrow focus of the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office on assessment through learning stories. There may need to be a reassessment within the early childhood education sector of the place of learning stories and the effect that the current emphasis placed on them is having on educators' practice.

The focus on documenting the learning of their own children, particularly in the first year as a Playcentre parent educator may have had benefits to the wider group. A key aspect of early childhood pedagogy is knowing the child and the parent's knowledge provided valuable insights to the other parent educators. Through the collective portfolio the learning stories were gaining a wider audience. The other parent educators were more able to use the insights provided by the parent educator's knowledge and understanding in their interactions with the child.

The reluctance of some of the parent educators to work in particular activity areas of the Playcentre may be one factor that limits the range of the competencies documented, but as the children's learning was documented by a number of parent educators any child's portfolio of learning was not necessarily compromised. This preference for particular areas of play is not particular to this Playcentre. For example, Cullen (1993) identified the preference of kindergarten teachers to work inside and the impact this had on children's outdoor experiences.

The assessment practice of the parent educators would seem to fit within the concepts of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and transformation of participation (Rogoff, 1997). In their early months as members of the Playcentre community the parent educators were expected to begin to write learning stories using the examples of more experienced parent educators and the mentoring they received from them to develop knowledge and understanding of the process. As they became more established members of the Playcentre community they were then expected to meet the policy of ensuring that two learning stories were written for each child every term. The most experienced parent educators saw their role as developing assessment policy and providing mentoring and leadership for the other parent educators. The sessional planning and evaluation meetings and the full planning, evaluation and assessment meetings that were led by the most experienced parent educators also were an important way in which new parent educators were drawn into the assessment culture of the Playcentre. The responses to the question asking about the most important source of their assessment knowledge clearly indicated that it was through this community of practice rather than the Playcentre Diploma of Early Childhood and Adult Education and professional learning and development courses that these parent educators developed their assessment expertise.

Although this research relates to a specific context, there are two elements that would seem worthy of further investigation. Is the rich community of practice typical of all Playcentres, and does it provide a model for other early childhood educators? Is the distorting nature of the pressure to write learning stories also evident in other types of early childhood education, and if so, what are the implications of this? Both of these questions would seem to provide fertile fields for early childhood researchers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent Mawson is a Principal Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland. His primary research and publication focus is on young children's collaborative play and leadership styles.