

Kei Tua o te Pae
Assessment for Learning:
Early Childhood Exemplars

How can children contribute to their own assessments?

He aha ngā hua a ngā tamariki ki tō rātou aromatawai?

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Introduction

He kupu whakataki

Te Whāriki affirms the view of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) that “Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity” (page 60) and by gradual “shifts in the balance of power” (page 212) from the teacher to the learner. These shifts reflect children’s increasing ability and inclination to steer their own course, set their own goals, assess their own achievements, and take on some of the responsibility for learning.

Traditionally, the balance of power between teacher and child during assessment has been very one-sided. The teacher writes the assessment, makes an interpretation, and perhaps discusses it with other teachers and the family, but the child has not usually been part of the process. The exemplars in this book show how a number of early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand are now finding ways to include children’s voices in assessment.

Why should children contribute to assessments?

He aha tā ngā tamariki ki ngā aromatawai?

There are two main reasons for teachers to encourage children and give them opportunities to contribute to assessment.

Firstly, research on assessment and motivation indicates that *settings that encourage children to set and assess their own goals are rich sites for learning*. Part of the reason is that children who contribute to their own (and others’) assessments are perceived as “competent and confident learners and communicators” (*Te Whāriki*, page 9).

The research of Carol Dweck (1999), Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998), and Bishop et al. (2001) indicates that when children contribute to their own assessments, they learn more effectively. Such contributions also help teachers to learn about children’s working theories about learning – knowledge that helps them to teach more effectively.

The Māori word “ako”, which means both teaching and learning, captures the way in which the two processes are woven together. “Ako” reminds us that teachers are also learners. Neil Mercer (2001) points out that one of the strengths of a sociocultural approach to education (see Book 2) is that it explains education in terms of the interactive process of teaching and learning and that Vygotsky used the Russian word “obuchenie”, which means both teaching and learning.

Secondly, *seeking children’s perspectives about their learning is about viewing children as social actors with opinions and views of their own*.

In a paper presented to the Commissioner of Social Policy outlining fundamental changes that need to be considered in order to achieve a more just society, Wally Penetito (1988) states:

There ought to be no doubt in the minds of teachers ... that children need to acquire in the first instance the relevant knowledge for their well-being. For children who wish to shape their own reality ... who wish to have control over their own learning, teachers must facilitate and empower them ...

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Encouraging children to set and assess goals

A central feature of effective pedagogy and learning is involving the learner in the meaning making and goal setting that are part of the assessment process.

In a review of the research literature on assessment, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) conclude that any strategy to improve learning through formative assessment should include a commitment to involving students in the processes of self-assessment and peer assessment.

Guy Claxton (1995) suggests that assessment should:

- reflect those occasions when the goal is not clearly specified in advance;
- include “all the situations in which learners are developing their sense of what counts as ‘good work’ for themselves – where it is some inner sense of satisfaction which is the touchstone of ‘quality’” (page 340).

The terms “whakamātau” (to enable one to learn and to test oneself) and “whakamātautau” (to test oneself and thus to evaluate oneself) illustrate the close connection between learning and self-evaluation (Pere, 1982, page 74).

Patricia Smiley and Carol Dweck (1994) write:

The results of our research and some related studies suggest that by 4 or 5 years of age children will have internalized an investment either in the evaluation of their achievement products or in the process of learning.

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Reporting on her research in the United States, Carol Dweck (1999) explains that children (including four-year-olds) develop orientations towards either performance goals or learning goals. When children are oriented towards learning goals, they strive to increase their competence, to understand or master something new, to attempt hard tasks, and to persist after failure or setback. When children are oriented towards performance goals, they strive to gain favourable judgments or to avoid negative judgments of their competence.

Most children approach problems, people, and places with an orientation towards both performance and learning goals. However, assessment practices have an important influence on the type of goals to which they are oriented (Ames, 1992). Assessments that include the “child’s voice” or children making a contribution to their assessments encourage an orientation towards learning goals. Assessments that call on reference levels or standards that children and families have not understood or legitimised are likely to shift this orientation towards performance goals.

Seeking children's perspectives

Where assessments take a narrative approach in context, the assessments – and the notions of valuable knowledge and competence that they take as reference points – can be legitimised by calling on multiple perspectives.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which New Zealand signed in 1993, includes the child's right to have a voice and to have it listened to and respected (Article 12). Respecting children's views means that their views can make a difference.

Teachers who pay careful attention to children's voices gain windows into their world views and assumptions. Detailed observations in context help adults to better understand children's perspectives, using the children's non-verbal expressions of self-assessment and their recognition of achievement (or lack of it).

A number of researchers have explored ways of seeking out children's perspectives. For example, Alison Clark and Peter Moss (2001) adopted what they called a "mosaic" approach (using a number of methods) to seek children's views on the quality of their childcare programmes. One piece of the "mosaic" was to give the children cameras to photograph their favourite things in the early childhood setting. Arapera Royal Tangaere (1997) analysed transcripts of a young child's dialogue in te reo Māori to reveal ways that Māori cultural values were expressed and learned.

Seeking children's perspectives enables researchers – and teachers – to make useful discoveries about children's learning. Margaret Carr (2000) describes research that sought young children's viewpoints about their learning. She found that, for many children, the learning that they perceived as challenging or difficult was not at the early childhood centre but at home or elsewhere in the community. Margie Hohepa et al. (1992) carried out an in-depth observational study of three children within a kōhanga reo context. This research revealed that the children valued both individualised and collective contexts for learning. Research by Bishop et al. (2003) affirms that when teachers seek learners' perspectives, learning is enhanced.

How can children contribute to assessments?

Me pēhea ngā tamariki e āwhina ai i ngā aromatawai?

Teachers can help children to contribute to their assessment in two ways: *through encouraging self-assessment* (which can be carried out in a variety of ways) and *by including the child's voice* in assessments that include multiple perspectives.

Different kinds of “self-assessment”

Children develop many goals for their learning, goals that are often hidden from the adult observer. Children frequently appear to “change track” as they work, and on many occasions, their goal is only apparent to adults in retrospect (and not always then). We have to find ways in which children can tell their own stories or be their own assessors without involvement in formal assessment. Not all children can do this, so we have to get to know the children well in order to notice and recognise their particular interests and goals – and we have to be open to changing our minds.

What to look for

- Children making their own judgments about their achievements, developing their sense of what counts as good work for themselves as learners.
- Children self-regulating, that is, self-assessing and giving themselves instructions about what to do. This includes seeing mistakes as part of the process of learning.
- Children deciding what should be recorded in their assessment portfolios.
- Occasions when the resources being used by children, for example, a completed puzzle, provide feedback about their performance.
- Evidence of “some inner sense of satisfaction” as the “touchstone” of quality (see Guy Claxton’s comments on page 3). Teachers who know children well can often identify that evidence.
- Children using materials to provide reference points against which to assess their achievements.
- Children using earlier work in their own assessment portfolios to judge current success or progress.
- Children revisiting their assessment portfolios, with or without the teacher.
- Children correcting their assessment portfolios.

Multiple perspectives that include the child's voice

Alison James and Alan Prout (1997), writing about constructing and reconstructing childhood, comment that:

it is now much more common to find acknowledgement that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to it; and that children should be seen as already social actors, not beings in the process of becoming such.

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If we want to recognise and respond to the learning that is taking place, we will seek multiple perspectives, one of which will be the child's.

Sometimes, the whānau will speak on behalf of the child, reflecting the aspirations and knowledge of the family and wider community. The 2003 *Hui Taumata Mātauranga Report Back* included a number of recommendations for whānau to be involved in and have a say in education (Ministry of Education, 2003). When considering Māori or bicultural models of assessment, adults need to ensure that they have an in-depth understanding of what Mason Durie (2003, page 1) describes as “working at the interface between te ao Māori (the Māori world) and te ao whānui (the wider global society)”. (See Book 3.)

What to look for

- Assessments that include a number of perspectives. One might be the child’s.
- Teachers or families taking on the perspective of a child, for example, by speaking on behalf of a child who cannot speak for themselves or trying to work out what is important for the child and what they would say if they were assessing for themselves.
- Teachers puzzling over the meaning of an observation as they try to decide how to assist the child with the next step. This, implicitly or explicitly, invites the child and family to have a say in the assessment, to contribute some more information or an opinion.
- Children assessing each other’s learning.
- Families contributing to the assessment record with or for the child. These contributions may reflect aspirations and knowledge from the community.

Links to *Te Whāriki*

Ngā hononga ki *Te Whāriki*

The principles of *Te Whāriki* as they apply to assessment are set out on page 30 of the curriculum. They include the following statement:

Assessment should be a two-way process. Children’s self-assessment can inform adults’ assessment of learning, development, and the environment by providing insights that adults may not have identified and by highlighting areas that could be included or focused on for assessment. Children may also help to decide what should be included in the process of assessing the programme and the curriculum.

The section on evaluation and assessment includes this statement:

The learning environment should enable children to set and pursue their own goals within the boundaries necessary for safety and to reflect on whether they have achieved their goals.

Te Whāriki, page 29

The learning environment can be more powerful than “enabling”. It can invite, stimulate, provoke, and encourage (literally, by inspiring children with the courage to set and pursue their own goals and to reflect on whether they have achieved them). Assessment practices that contribute to children’s views of themselves as competent and confident learners and communicators within a bicultural context are part of just such an enabling, inviting, stimulating, provoking, and encouraging learning environment.