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

5

What difference does assessment make to children's learning? Community

He aha ngā hua o te aromatawai mō te ako tamariki? Hapori

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Introduction — He kupu whakataki

> Exemplars are examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the *learning community (children, families, whānau, teachers, and beyond)* can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways.
>
> Early Childhood Learning and Assessment Exemplar Project Advisory Committee and Co-ordinators, 2002 (emphasis added)

Exemplar books 5, 6, and 7 ask the question: "What difference does assessment make to children's learning?" These exemplar books are about the purposes and consequences of documented assessment in early childhood.[1] We know that feedback to children makes a difference to their learning. What difference does documented assessment make? The exemplars collected for the Exemplar Project suggest that documented assessments can make a difference to:

- community: inviting the participation of children, families, whānau, teachers, and beyond;
- competence: making visible the learning that is valued;
- continuity: fostering ongoing and diverse pathways.

This book is about the first of these: community. Documented assessments can invite people to participate in a particular learning community designed to foster children's learning.

Developing learning communities | He whakatipu hapori akoranga

Etienne Wenger (1998) explains that:

> Students need:
>
> 1. places of engagement
>
> 2. materials and experiences with which to build an image of the world and themselves
>
> 3. ways of having an effect on the world and making their actions matter.
>
> From this perspective the purpose of educational design is not to appropriate learning and institutionalize it into an engineered process, but to support the formation of learning communities ...
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> page 271

Teaching and learning events can be designed around learning communities, and learning communities can be connected to the world in meaningful ways.

There are four main aspects to the development of learning communities, each of which is discussed below:

- developing relationships;
- making some of the work public;
- making connections between the early childhood setting and home;
- making connections between the learning community and the world in meaningful ways.

[1] Exemplar books 5, 6, and 7 owe much to a position paper written for the Exemplar Project (Carr and Cowie, 2003). They also draw from a paper presented to the NZCER Annual Conference (Carr et al., 2001).

Developing relationships

The idea of a learning community is introduced in Book 2. It is helpful to think of the early childhood setting as a learning community constructed through the everyday responsive and reciprocal relationships that develop between those who belong to it.

Research indicates that responsive and reciprocal relationships between teachers and children are rich contexts for learning. Siraj-Blatchford et al.'s (2002) report on the Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (EPEY) study (2002), a large-scale research project in the United Kingdom, concludes that:

> adult-child interactions that involve some element of "sustained shared thinking" or what Bruner has termed "joint involvement episodes" may be especially valuable in terms of children's learning.
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> page 10

Sheridan McKinley (2000) designed a study to identify the aspirations and concerns of Māori parents and whānau regarding their children's education. She asked parents to describe their best teacher at either primary or secondary school and asked children to describe the characteristics of their teacher that they liked most. For the parents, the most desirable characteristics were that teachers:

- were caring and friendly, recognised the potential in children, and were comfortable;
- were respectful;
- were upfront, direct, honest, and fair.

For the children, the characteristics of their teacher that they most liked were that they:

- were kind;
- had a close relationship with the children;
- provided help when it was needed;
- provided interesting activities.

McKinley's findings emphasise the importance Māori parents and children place on belonging to learning communities in which their relationships with teachers are warm, friendly, honest, and respectful.

Huhana Rokx (2000) outlines some relevant concepts as they relate to Māori traditions.

> Let me break down the concepts of collectivism and interdependency as I see them relating to Māori traditions. These are the concepts of manaakitanga, aroha, awhi, tuakana-teina, kōrero, waiata etc. These concepts are all based on face-to-face, in-your-face, physical persona interactions and relationships. Or in other words, people. He aha te mea nui i te ao? He tangata. What is the most important thing in the world? People. People interacting with people.
>
> page 16

One way in which teachers can build responsive and reciprocal relationships with children is by sharing their own home experiences.

Vivian Gussin Paley (2001) demonstrates how sharing personal experiences can be a key feature of teaching in *In Mrs Tully's Room*. Mrs Tully, the supervisor of a childcare centre, tells numerous stories about her grandfather in order to assist the children to understand their own learning experiences.

Making some of the work public

Learning communities are also constructed by writing down or recording some of the work of the community. A learning community is a place of collective participation. One of the ways the participants are connected together as a "community" engaged in learning is through the community's practice being made public or documented. If the practice is made public (to even a limited audience) or documented, then it is available and visible, not only for the teachers but also for the children, families, whānau, and beyond to "read" in some way.

Etienne Wenger (1998) writes about the need for a balance in education between participation and what he calls "reification" (making something public, making it "concrete", realising or documenting it). He suggests that designing an educational programme requires two kinds of opportunities for negotiating meaning in a learning community:

1. One can make sure that some artifacts are in place – tools, plans, procedures, schedules, curriculums – so that the future will have to be organised around them.
2. One can also make sure that the right people are at the right place in the right kind of relationship to make something happen.

pages 231–232

The artefacts in place will include documented assessments, and these will influence parents' aspirations and expectations. There is a considerable body of research that suggests that parents' aspirations and expectations (as well as their beliefs about whether achievement is associated with effort or innate ability) influence children's achievement in a range of ways (for example, Biddulph et al., 2003, and Frome and Eccles, 1998). Some further New Zealand studies of family aspirations for their children are also outlined in Sarah Farquhar's research synthesis (2003; page 14).

Some of the parents in Sheridan McKinley's (2000) study believed:

> that their children entered wharekura [Māori-immersion secondary schools], from kura kaupapa Māori [Māori-immersion primary schools], with a confidence and an eagerness to learn because the teachers had instilled the belief that the child could achieve anything they wanted to. There was no such phrase as "I can't".

page 87

Documented assessments can contribute to and construct such beliefs.

Making connections between the early childhood setting and home

Including families and whānau in the early childhood centre's curriculum and assessment enhances children's learning. Families enrich the record of learning, reduce some of the uncertainty and ambiguity, and provide a bridge for connecting experiences. Early childhood settings can include families in their assessment and curriculum in many ways. Documented assessments that are sent home regularly invite and encourage families to take part in the learning community. As many settings have found, narratives of achievements are a particularly successful way of doing this. In some settings, families write "parent" or "whānau" stories to add to their children's portfolios. Children contribute as well (see Book 4). A wider community of people and places can be part of the curriculum and become part of the assessments as well, for example, local whānau can provide guidelines for definitions of competence in a number of domains.

In parent and whānau-based programmes, family and centre are closely aligned.

> If we visit Bronfenbrenner's ecology model, he talked about the home and the centre as being two distinctive microsystems of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Both were separate. In kōhanga reo the two microsystems must overlap. The overlap is brought about by the commitment to the kaupapa and the entire whānau ownership of *Te Whāriki*.
>
> Arapera Royal Tangaere, 2000, page 28

Biddulph et al. (2003) include a chapter on centre or school partnerships with family and community in their best evidence synthesis of research in *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand*. They conclude:

> There are various forms of partnership, but not all are effective. Those which are poorly designed, based on deficit views, and not responsive to the needs of families can be ineffective, and even counterproductive.
>
> page 172

They cite as an example of a successful overseas initiative the partnership between the Pen Green Centre and the community in Corby, England (pages 166–167).

Making connections between the learning community and the world in meaningful ways

Book 6 outlines three aspects of competence. Two of these are "learning strategies and dispositions" and "social roles and culturally valued literacies". Children explore and develop these aspects by engaging with people, places, and things and through the involvement of the early childhood learning community in the outside world. For example, visiting artists can help the learning community set reference points for competence in art. Exemplars throughout the books provide examples of the documentation of these connections. The documentation itself then contributes to the resources of the community.

Biddulph et al. (2003) report that in:

> a small study of Tongan parents living in Auckland, Fusitu'a and Coxon (1998) found that a significant motivating force behind the desire of these parents for their children to be successful in school was their hope that their children would be fie'aonga (useful) to their own community.
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> page 118

What to look for

- Assessments that are accessible and detailed enough to invite children and families to suggest developments and alternatives and to bring knowledge and expectations from home. They can be revisited at home with family, whānau, and the wider community of friends and neighbours. They also clarify teachers' interpretations and expectations.
- Assessments that include contributions from home that can be revisited in the early childhood setting. Teachers and children can make connections with the knowledge and expectations at home.
- Assessments that reflect manaakitanga and include in the early childhood setting some of the socially and culturally valued roles in the community, including tuakana-teina roles and the role of carer for the environment.
- Assessments that reflect two-way conversations between the early childhood setting and the wider community.
- Assessments that record ongoing explorations of the local landscape and valued people, places, things, and times.
- Assessments that document literacies and ongoing relationships with people from a diversity of cultures in the community.

Links to *Te Whāriki* Ngā hononga ki *Te Whāriki*

The exemplars in this book supplement those in Book 2 where the four principles of *Te Whāriki* are discussed and exemplified separately. Learning communities that are empowering take a holistic approach to learning. They are constructed through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things as well as through involving whānau and community. All the principles are integrated in the development of a community that will foster ongoing and diverse pathways of learning.

Assessments will contribute to the development of bicultural learning communities committed to kotahitanga, ngā hononga, and whakawhanaungatanga. The development of communities of learners will be reflected in concepts such as manaakitanga, aroha, awhi, tuakana-teina, kōrero, and waiata (see page 3).