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

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

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

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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)

This is the second of three books of exemplars that ask the question "What difference does assessment make to children's learning?" Assessments can make learning visible and foster learning that is valued. The learning is described as competence in line with the aspiration for children "to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators" in *Te Whāriki* (1996, page 9). It is also consistent with the statement that educators should implement curriculum and assessment practices that "enhance their [the children's] sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners" (*Te Whāriki*, 1996, page 30).

Book 1 in this series defines assessment for learning as "noticing, recognising, and responding". The commentaries in documented assessments can make visible the identity of the child as a competent, confident learner. Children, families, whānau, and teachers can revisit the assessments to discuss the learning that they value, what they regard as "competence", and how competence is enhanced.

One of the parents at an early childhood centre, interviewed by the teacher about her experience of writing learning stories for her son Tom's folder, said:

> Cause you just get on with ordinary everyday life, and you start taking things for granted about them, whereas this sort of thing [being invited to contribute to the assessment folder] makes you stop and really look, and think about, "oh ... yes that's really interesting". Or that's quite a big learning step for them, by doing what they did, or what they said.
>
> Radford, 2001, page 24

One of the stories she wrote was about Tom's perseverance as he made a card for his nan in which he wanted to draw a "gust of wind". As such stories are read back to Tom, he is likely to develop a sense of himself as a capable person and a competent learner. This awareness will impact on his learning.

Te Whāriki upholds the right for Māori to have a voice and be visible in early childhood education. At the 2001 Hui Taumata Mātauranga, Mason Durie introduced a framework for Māori educational achievement. He explained that:

> In order to reach the three goals: to live as Māori, to participate as citizens of the world, and to enjoy good health and a high standard of living, education must be guided by sound principles. Some principles go almost without saying – treating students with respect, establishing good relationships between school and home, acknowledging the dignity and uniqueness of all learners.

Mason Durie identified three overarching principles for education: the principle of best outcomes, the principle of integrated action, and the principle of indigeneity. His goals and principles also reinforce the importance of children developing a sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners. Research supports this claim: in a comprehensive survey of research on assessment for learning, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) state that "There is evidence from many studies that learners' beliefs about their capacity as learners can affect their achievement" (page 24).

The New Zealand Competent Children project used the following criteria to describe competence:

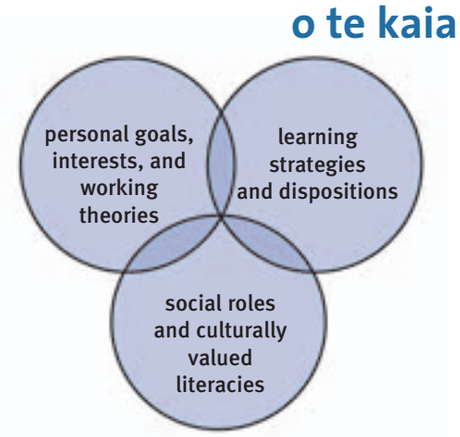
> We called this the Competent Children project because we wanted to look at outcomes for children as broadly as we could. We included ten 'competencies' – particular combinations of knowledge, skills and dispositions – that seemed to underpin successful learning, growth to adulthood, and adulthood itself, and which were consistent with *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand ECE curriculum, then in draft form. These are: literacy (reading, writing), mathematics, logical problem solving, communication (receptive and expressive language use), perseverance, social skills with peers, social skills with adults, individual responsibility (self-management), curiosity and motor skills.
>
> Wylie and Thompson, 2003, pages 70–71

Three aspects of competence

Ngā aronga e toru o te kaiaka

Teachers and other adults who work with children are invited to explore the following three aspects of competence:

- personal goals, interests, and working theories;
- learning strategies and dispositions;
- social roles and culturally valued literacies.



Each of these three aspects involves knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The aspects overlap, and the purposes of them will often be in opposition to each other. For example, personal goals and the smooth running of a centre may be at odds with each other. Māori aspirations for Māori children and the implementation of bicultural goals may also pose some major challenges. Tension between personal goals and social roles can raise issues of inclusion and exclusion, as illustrated in Vivian Paley's book *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (1992).

Personal goals, interests, and working theories

Children develop competence as they pursue their personal interests and goals. They develop working theories about themselves as learners and about the world around them. Their goals, interests, and working theories may not be immediately apparent, and many will change during the learning itself.

The longitudinal New Zealand Competent Children project (Wylie and Thompson, 2003, page 74) concluded that a number of items that described early childhood settings continued to show positive associations with children's competencies at age ten, after taking family income and maternal qualification levels into account. Three of these were: "Children can select from a variety of activities", "Children can complete activities", and "Staff are responsive to individual children."

Suzanne Hidi (1990) summarised the research on interest and its contribution to learning. She found that:

> Individual interests have a profound effect on cognitive functioning and performance (individuals interested in a task or an activity have been shown to pay more attention, persist for longer periods of time, and acquire more and qualitatively different knowledge than individuals without such interest) ...
>
> page 554

Learning strategies and dispositions

In documented assessments, teachers consider children's culture, skills, inclinations, and intentions in relation to participation in learning and educational settings. Participation may be described differently in different settings. In any early childhood setting, children will have opportunities to explore and participate in a variety of ways.

Strategies and dispositions develop best in the context of whanaungatanga or reciprocal and responsive relationships with people, places, and things in the early childhood setting and beyond. Assessments are part of these reciprocal and responsive relationships.

Joy Cullen (1991) studied sixteen four- and five-year-olds at two pre-primary centres in Perth, Australia. She identified the following effective learning strategies: task persistence, use of resources, use of peers as a resource, use of adults as a resource, seeing self as a resource for others, directing self, and directing others. One year later, she reported, "Children whose approach to learning at pre-school was characterised by a range of strategic behaviours and reflective skills maintained a strategic approach to learning in their first year at school" (page 44).

Arapera Royal Tangaere (1997) refers to a strategy of learning that is significant to Māori: that of tuakana and teina, where the more skilled peer, or tuakana, scaffolds the less competent child, or teina, to a higher level of understanding and knowing.

Liz Brooker (2002) researched the experience of the first year of school of sixteen four-year-olds. One of her conclusions was that "learning dispositions" were "an important indicator of their future school success" (page 148).

Social roles and culturally valued literacies

As children learn, they explore a variety of roles and literacies and the skills and understandings that are allied to them. These roles and literacies may be valued nationally, or they may be specific to certain social or cultural groups.

In learning communities, children will have the opportunity to try out a range of sociocultural roles and their associated competencies, for example, tuakana, teina, friend, measurer, jam maker, tower builder, kaimahi, observer of insects, reader, citizen of the world, and member of hapū and iwi.

Children will also have opportunities to develop skills and understandings within a range of literacies, including reading, writing, mathematics, information technology, and the arts. (Future books will describe how assessments can contribute to these particular literacies.)

In her research study of children learning in home-based settings, Lyn Wright (2003) includes a chapter entitled Learning Outcomes for Children: Meaning-making and Multiple Identities. She comments:

> Whilst the identities being explored at times were clearly on topics such as mathematics, or gaining mastery over their bodies, or becoming independent, identities relating to being social participants in a setting were also being explored.
>
> page 157

She describes, for instance, Alice "being a teacher".

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

The metaphor of weaving in *Te Whāriki* illustrates that "each early childhood service can weave the particular pattern that makes its programme different and distinctive" (page 28). In the same way, multiple meanings of competence and multiple ongoing learning pathways will develop. However, all assessments should take a considered approach to competence, with *Te Whāriki* in mind. *Te Whāriki* also emphasises Māori perspectives within the curriculum framework:

> In early childhood education settings, all children should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge and an understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
>
> *Te Whāriki,* page 9

The three aspects of competence discussed in this book are intrinsic to *Te Whāriki*.

Personal goals, interests, and working theories

In *Te Whāriki*, learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) are summarised in the following comment.

> In early childhood, children are developing more elaborate and useful working theories about themselves and about the people, places, and things in their lives. These working theories contain a combination of knowledge about the world, skills and strategies, attitudes, and expectations.
>
> *Te Whāriki,* page 44

The principle of empowerment emphasises children's rights and their need to pursue their own *goals* and *interests* as a base for developing working theories.

> The early childhood curriculum builds on the child's own experiences, knowledge, skills, attitudes, needs, interests, and views of the world within each particular setting. Children will have the opportunity to create and act on their own ideas, to develop knowledge and skills in areas that interest them, and to make an increasing number of their own decisions and judgments.
>
> *Te Whāriki,* page 40

Empowerment is also about providing children with bicultural tools to extend the complexity of their learning. The curriculum can provide authentic opportunities for children to engage in learning experiences that allow them to understand Māori language, values, beliefs, and practices.

> Ka ako i ngā tikanga e tuku kaha nei ki te hinengaro … . Ka ako i ngā whakamārama o te Ao Māori Tawhito mō te Taiao, mō Te Pō, me Te Kore. Ka ako i ngā whakamārama o Te Ao Hou mō ngā Whakangaromanga Ao, mō te āhua o ngā wā o mua, me muri nei, ā, mō ngā wānanga hoki mō tōna āhua ake, me te take i whānau mai ai ia ki tēnei ao.
>
> *Te Whāriki,* page 34

Many personal interests and goals come from the family and are fostered through relationships that are significant to children.

Learning strategies and dispositions

Te Whāriki also summarises learning outcomes "as dispositions – 'habits of mind' or 'patterns of learning'" (page 44).

> Dispositions to learn develop when children are immersed in an environment that is characterised by well-being and trust, belonging and purposeful activity, contributing and collaborating, communicating and representing, and exploring and guided participation.
>
> *Te Whāriki*, page 45

Relationships are a key factor in helping children to develop dispositions to learn.

> This curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things.
>
> *Te Whāriki*, page 9

> Kia mōhio ia ki ngā kārangaranga whānau ... . Kia mōhio hoki ki a Ranginui rāua ko Papatūānuku, ā rāua tamariki, me ngā kōrero mō rātou.
>
> *Te Whāriki*, page 35

Social roles and culturally valued literacies

Te Whāriki also suggests learning outcomes that relate to children's need to explore social roles and literacies that are culturally valued. It reminds us that:

> Language does not consist only of words, sentences, and stories: it includes the language of images, art, dance, drama, mathematics, movement, rhythm, and music.
>
> *Te Whāriki*, page 72

For example, language also includes the signs and symbols of kapa haka, waiata and mahi toi. In addition, *Te Whāriki* emphasises the importance of encouraging children to explore a variety of roles regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, ability, or background. (See pages 66–67.) *Te Whāriki* also helps us to understand that children belong to different communities and that these communities are sources of learning.

> Each community to which a child belongs, whether it is a family home or an early childhood setting outside the home, provides opportunities for new learning to be fostered: for children to reflect on alternative ways of doing things; make connections across time and place; establish different kinds of relationship; and encounter different points of view.
>
> *Te Whāriki*, page 9

These relationships may refer back to the past to seek the roles and literacies that earlier generations have developed. Culturally valued roles and literacies are a major aspect of competence in *Te Whāriki*. For example,

- kia mōhio ia ... ki ōna marae, ki ngā pepeha hoki o ōna iwi.

Te Whāriki, page 36

- ka mōhio rātou ki tō rātou reo, ki ā rātou tikanga Māori, ki ō rātou tūrangawaewae ...
- ka mōhio rātou ki ō rātou whānau me ō rātou ao.

Te Whāriki, page 40

This reminds us that whanaungatanga underpins much that is socially and culturally valued.

Future books in this series will further exemplify the three aspects of competence discussed in this book within the curriculum strands of Well-being/Mana Atua, Belonging/Mana Whenua, Contribution/Mana Tangata, Communication/Mana Reo, and Exploration/Mana Aotūroa.