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

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What do assessments tell us about the learning of infants and toddlers?

He aha ngā kōrero a te aromatawai mō te ako o te kōhungahunga, tamariki?

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Introduction — He kupu whakataki

This book explores assessment and what it might look like for infants and toddlers in the context of *Te Whāriki*. The book also includes ideas that are relevant to children of all ages in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand.

> Assessments are a tool for social thinking and action. We suggest that in an early childhood or school setting this social thinking and action is of a particular kind and has a particular purpose: mutual feedback and dialogue about learning.
>
> Cowie and Carr, 2004

Frequently, teachers cannot be certain of the nature of children's learning, especially that of very young children. Infants' and toddlers' working theories about the world change rapidly. Their discoveries are often unrecognised by others, and they may communicate in ways that are different from those of their older peers. Communication with families and whānau is especially important when assessing infants and toddlers, as are intuitive practitioners who come to know the children really well.

Infants and toddlers often appear to be attending to several events at the same time. Barbara Rogoff (2003) suggests that this may be specifically encouraged in some cultures. She describes a twelve-month-old Mayan child who "attended skilfully to three events at once" (page 321), playing with things in a jar with his sister, whistling on a toy whistle, and intently watching a truck passing in the street. Noticing, recognising, and responding to such complexity relies on sensitive observations, understanding the nature of learning for very young children, and knowing the child and the curriculum well. It also requires us to use our intuition and to be open to multiple possibilities and pathways for learning.

Some key features of assessments for and with infants and toddlers have emerged from the exemplars. They are:

- reciprocal and responsive relationships with people, places, and things;
- involving families and whānau in assessment;
- families and whānau becoming members of the early childhood learning community.

Reciprocal and responsive relationships — Ngā whakawhanaungatanga

Reciprocal and responsive relationships contribute to infants and toddlers developing a sense of security and competence. Assessment, both undocumented and documented, takes place within reciprocal and responsive relationships. In the context of such relationships, teachers can contribute to constructing meaning with and between infants or toddlers. They can do this by listening and watching attentively and being alert to modes of communication such as vocalisation, facial expressions, gestures, and expressive body movements. Often this means noticing, recognising, and responding in several ways, using encouraging body language and an attentive presence as much as more overt interactions.

Responsive and reciprocal relationships extend widely for the Māori child. Two of the fundamental principles outlined in *A Draft Charter of the Rights of the Māori Child* (Early Childhood Development, 2002) are:

> Whanaungatanga. The Māori child descends from a unique culture and history based on strong genealogical links and relationships, and has the right to be respected within the full context of those links and relationships.
>
> Ngā Hononga. The Māori child exists within a society of extensive relationships, and has the right to know, contribute positively to, and benefit from those relationships.

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Joint attention and guided participation

In discussing "educare" – the inseparability of education from care – from a sociocultural perspective, Anne Smith (1996) maintains that the teacher's role in the mix is critical:

> Looking at early childhood educare from a sociocultural perspective puts the emphasis right where it should be, on the role of the teacher. Teachers need to be involved in a dynamic interactive relationship with children, not through a didactic approach, but through being sensitively attuned to children's abilities, interests and strengths and being accessible enough to provide scaffolding which extends them and builds bridges between the known and unknown.
>
> pages 55–56

In a later study of two hundred two-year-old children's experiences of the nature and extent of joint attention episodes, Smith (1999) identified that "adult-child shared attention is an essential feature of quality" (page 96). A parallel may be drawn with Barbara Rogoff's (1990) notion of "guided participation" in the curriculum. She says that:

> caregivers and children collaborate in arrangements and interactions that support children in learning to manage the skills and values of mature members of their society. Guided participation is ... a process in which caregivers' and children's roles are entwined, with tacit as well as explicit learning opportunities in the routine arrangements and interactions between caregivers and children.
>
> page 65

The following is an example of guided participation in action:

> I had set up the drums. Lily was beating them with her hand and a drumstick. I got out *Ten in the Bed* by Penny Dale (a favourite book). I sat by Gemma and started reading. Every time I said "roll over", I beat the cymbal on my knee. Lily copied the sound and rhythm on the drum. What next? Lily came over to me and took the book over to the drums. She beat the drum with the book, singing, "Roll over, roll over."
>
> Excerpt from a child's portfolio, 2003

The definitions of "joint attention" and "guided participation" are culturally specific. For example, Barbara Rogoff (2003) describes a cultural community in which small children are not asked questions to which the adults already know the answers (for example, "What is this?") and "toddlers learn to sit very still and listen to adults talk" (page 325). She describes this as "intent" participation, where involvement includes children attentively listening and observing before they "have a go" themselves. In a number of contexts, very young children learn by observing and listening as well as (or in preparation for) participating actively.

Assessment is itself a cultural practice. If infants and toddlers are learning through observing and listening in on assessment in action, they are, in effect, being inducted into this cultural endeavour (Rogoff, 2003). Children who observe others taking photos, recording, revisiting, and discussing learning may learn enough of the tasks associated with assessment that they eventually see themselves as able to contribute to this practice in some way.

Involving families and whānau in assessment

Te kuhunga mai o ngā whānau

Families and whānau know their children well. They must be included in the mutual feedback loops that contribute to informal and formal assessment in early childhood settings. In the case of infants and toddlers, parents and whānau are often able to fill gaps in the teachers' understanding or to explain the learning with reference to events and circumstances beyond the early childhood setting. They are able to widen the horizon, to extend the view of the other adults in the child's life. This book, for instance, features documented assessments of Michael (pages 19 to 21) as he develops a sense of identity at his centre and at home. Through his relationships with the people in those settings, he is able to actively take on multiple roles – a helper, a brother, and a friend. The feedback loop in this case includes Michael's twelve-year-old sister Roberta, who provides a written assessment of what her eighteen-month-old brother is able to do and is enthusiastic about.

Huhana Rokx (2000) points out the value of collectivism and interdependency in Māori tradition. Teaching and assessment by peers is commonplace. In a discussion of Māori methods of teaching and learning, Arapera Royal Tangaere (1997) describes the concept of tuakana–teina as it is derived from the two principles of whanaungatanga and ako[1]:

> Tuakana means older sibling (brother to a boy or sister to a girl), and teina a younger sibling (brother to a boy or sister to a girl). Therefore the idea of the learner taking on the responsibility of being the teacher or tuakana to her or his teina is acceptable and in fact encouraged from an early age. This is the essence of love and care for one another in the whānau. It reinforces the principles of whanaungatanga.
>
> page 12

Becoming members of the early childhood learning community

Te whakauru ki roto i ngā akoranga o te ao kōhungahunga

Assessment contributes to infants, toddlers, and their families and whānau becoming members of the early childhood learning community. A common message in literature about curriculum is that it is important for infants and toddlers to construct an identity of self in their social and cultural worlds through respectful interactions with the people, places, and things in these worlds. For example, Carmen Dalli (2000) discusses what young children learn about relating to adults in the first weeks of starting childcare. Assessments that take note of the actions of infants and toddlers as they make sense of their worlds – the people, places, and things in their lives – can contribute to teachers' and families' recognition of learning and in turn inform potential responses.

Miriam Rosenthal (2000) writes, "Children's experiences and interactions at home and in childcare are likely to be quite different" (page 12). However, she adds that under certain conditions, children can move between the two environments in the same way as some bilingual children do when they use different languages in different social contexts. These "certain conditions" include parents and teachers being aware of the differences in each other's expectations and assumptions about developmental goals for children or valued child-rearing and educational practices. Portfolios and notebooks that both families and teachers contribute to can assist with establishing these conditions.

Arapera Royal Tangaere (2000) notes that in kōhanga reo, the two microsystems of home and centre must overlap. "The overlap is brought about by the commitment to the kaupapa and the entire whānau ownership of *Te Whāriki*" (page 28).

[1] "The word ako means to learn as well as to teach. In the Māori world therefore it is an acceptable practice for the learner to shift roles and become the teacher, and for the teacher to become the learner." (Royal Tangaere, 1997, page 12)

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

Including infants and toddlers in the educational and cultural practices of an early childhood setting requires assessment practices to be as holistic and respectful for them as for older children. It is not appropriate for infants and toddlers to experience a curriculum that is only about emotional well-being and physical development; all five strands of *Te Whāriki* are applicable, and assessment should reflect this.

> Assessment of children should encompass all dimensions of children's learning and development and should see the child as a whole. Attributes such as respect, curiosity, trust, reflection, a sense of belonging, confidence, independence, and responsibility are essential elements of the early childhood curriculum: they are extremely difficult to measure but are often observable in children's responses and behaviours.
>
> *Te Whāriki*, page 30

Te Whāriki is designed with the same bicultural aspirations, principles, and strands in mind for all children. However, it also emphasises that "The care of infants is specialised and is neither a scaled-down three- or four-year-old programme nor a baby-sitting arrangement" (page 22).

Carmen Dalli (2002) describes the powerful influence of teachers' expectations and assumptions on children's experience of starting childcare. *Te Whāriki* also argues that:

> Assessment is influenced by the relationships between adults and children, just as children's learning and development are influenced by the relationships they form with others. This influence should be taken into consideration during all assessment practice. Adults are learners too, and they bring expectations to the assessment task. The expectations of adults are powerful influences on children's lives. If adults are to make informed observations of children, they should recognise their own beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes and the influence these will have on the children.
>
> page 30

Assessment practices contribute to the development of children's identities as competent and capable learners and communicators. Assessment practices can also contribute to the expectations that adults have of each other's roles in the teaching and learning process, especially when children and whānau first become members of an early childhood setting's community.