

Early Education

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- Involving parents •
- Learning stories? •
- Managing funding cuts •

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Back cover: We got certificates! Youko Kawaguchi & Aalisha Leumuara at Wesley Kindergarten.

Photos

Photo p. 19 courtesy of Mary Rose.
Contributors supplied the other photos in this issue.
(Thank you!).

Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community. Please keep copies of any contributions as we cannot guarantee to return what is sent. Cover photos need to be 'high resolution'.

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A year of monumental change

What a year 2010 has been. As we write this, our hearts go out to the families, friends and colleagues of the miners at the Pike River Mine on the West Coast, and also to friends and colleagues in Christchurch, who have lived through the initial crisis of major earthquake and more than 3,000 tremors. The effects of calamity will be felt day to day in early childhood centres. It will be evident in children's play. It can be community-building even while individuals, adults and children are struggling to cope. Kia kaha e hoa ma.

In our professional world, the biggest crisis of the year was the government's Budget 2010 announcement. Although we might have predicted this on the basis of the 2009 budget, the funding cuts came as an earth shattering change to centres and families. We'd argue that it's a calamity for our sector to see the aspirations of the 2002 strategic plan reneged on and to have a Minister of Education who doesn't seem to understand the importance of qualified teachers for our youngest children.

If there is an upside to this calamity, it must include awareness that the politics of education affect all of us. In centres which work in a participatory model with staff and parent communities, the conversations about this are happening throughout the country. We need to keep active in the political processes even while adapting to the seismic shifts.

In 'Managing the squeeze?', our centre-based colleagues illustrate that many have worked collaboratively to find ways to maintain a qualified teaching workforce despite the funding cuts. But it means compromises in other areas, such as increasing group size and parent fees alongside decreased use of support services like relievers. This will impact on students who use relieving positions to not only survive whilst studying, but also to gain valuable experience.

Another funding cut has also just been announced, this time affecting centres with provisionally registered teachers. While we understand that funds will still be available for centres with less than 80% fully qualified staff, we predict that the effect on new graduates will include increased pressure to step prematurely into leadership roles rather than using their first years post-graduation to experience excellent teaching practice and close mentoring.

Of course money does not determine innovation (although it helps!). Maryrose Doull presents a nice account of the Read-a-thon at Wesley Kindergarten, which demonstrates how a simple concept can bring families into

kindergarten and promote both partnership with families and literacy acquisition in children in low decile areas; a simple and inexpensive way to meet the current government goals for increasing literacy achievement.

Arguing that many centres exclusive and arduous use of learning stories as an assessment tool constrains their ability to monitor children's learning on a daily basis, Ken Blaiklock proposes an alternative, simple assessment model.

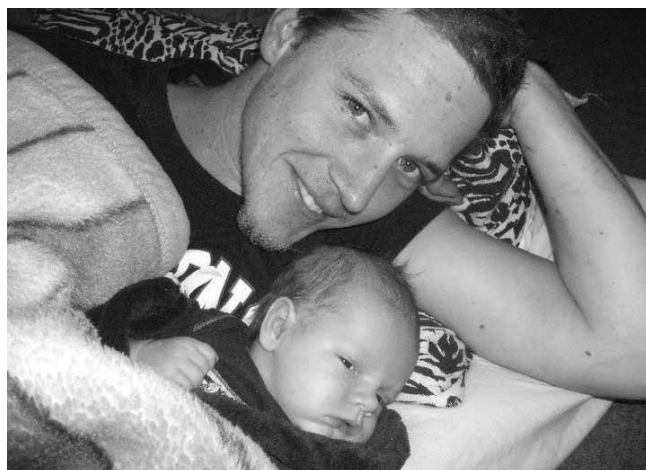
Writing of her personal experiences of working alongside families with special needs, Amanda Fourie reminds us of the importance of the interpersonal within early childhood education.

And the personal is on top for us as we review 2010. This was the year when the generations shifted for Claire welcomed her first grandchild and farewelled her beloved father. Our families ground us and sharpen our purpose. Of her late father, Claire says: I've lost my wise companion for debating the errors, omissions, oversights and stupidities of government. My father used to often say "hold fast to that which is good..."

This is wisdom that we need in the battles ahead for our sector.

He toka tū moana. Stand strong like the rock stands against the sea.

***Sue Stover and Claire McLachlan,
editors***



**Jeremy and Vaughn Smith, September 2010
(Claire's baby with his).**

Letter from ... Otautahi Christchurch

Alex Gunn

Every now and again as I write this letter from my desk, I am shaken by another aftershock in the wake of the September 4 earthquake. Since that morning much psychological and physical energy has been spent on early responses to recovery; dismay, fright and anxiety has been mixed with a good deal of sleep deprivation, laughter and comic relief at the absurdity of various random acts - sitting in a port-a-loo in the middle of a suburban Christchurch street is something I won't forget in a hurry! I would like to thank the community at large for the messages of support and encouragement received. It may feel like you can't help if you're not here, but I assure you, that quick text or email is encouraging, it seems to make a difference to increased wellbeing, every day.

I have to say, the welcome familiarity of routine is now, two weeks on, beginning to help me and many others get up and get going after the shock of this extraordinary event. Having just begun settling back in at work, I was pleasantly distracted by contents of my email inbox this morning - this is not a comment that I'd normally be able to make - but sitting there for me today were several fascinating proposals for the 10th Early Childhood Convention, waiting to be reviewed.

I have been intimately involved over the past two and a half years in planning for and organising the next Convention. Working amongst a dedicated group of stewards, working party members and the wider early childhood community, a lot of our work up until now has been mostly in the abstract: a proposed schedule here, a dinner plan there, ideas for the social programme, the possibility of a full programme of papers, workshops, excursions and symposia to engage and provoke. This morning's email in-box contents brought everything into focus - here they were - a representation of the myriad of ideas, research and professional learning opportunities bursting to be shared when we come together in community in Christchurch in April of next year.

The theme of the 10th Early Childhood Convention is 'He ihu waka, he ihu whēnua', Where the canoe touches the land. In the early planning stages for Convention, we began to imagine the event as a vehicle for bringing diverse peoples together in a way that would provide moments of connection and possibility for early childhood education in Aotearoa and beyond. We could see that from this place, where the diversity of early childhood education temporarily braids together, in much the same ways as Canterbury's unique river landscapes, the Convention could be seen as a platform from which we could all gain strength and voice to carve

anew the lands to which we would later return. Coming together - re-focussing - re-energising - moving ahead; these have all been key ideas behind our thinking.

Convention happens only once every four years. Since Rotorua in 2007, significant erosions to the provision of quality of early childhood education have been brought about by various policy u-turns and initiatives of the incumbent National-led Government. We have witnessed:

- 100% registered teacher targets dropped, and cuts to funding for services employing over 75% qualified staff. By the time Convention occurs, the full force of this latest policy change will be being felt as funding cuts from February 2011, take hold;
- An extension of the '20 hours free ECE' policy (to Playcentre and Kohanga Reo), but also its renaming as '20 hours ECE'. The consequence of this nomenclature change is not yet known but it is easy to imagine what it may give rise to in the future;
- The withholding of the implementation of the full set of planned new regulations for early childhood education and the rescinding of agreed improvements to adult:child ratios;
- Cuts to early childhood PD and a narrowing of focus along with the cessation of assessment for learning initiatives and the COI research programme.

I am in no doubt that there is a great deal for us to discuss in April as a community of educators, researchers, policy makers and whānau. I note 2011 is also the year of our next general election - the politicians will surely welcome a steer from the field as they prepare campaigns and policy documents for the future.

Christchurch right now may well be shaken, and it could be said we're even a little bit stirred, but we are still gearing up for an exciting and engaging Convention in 2011. If the proposals I read this morning are an indication to go by, I can't wait! For updates and information about registration et cetera, be sure to visit the website at www.eccconvention2011.org.nz, see you after Easter weekend next year.



He ihu waka, he ihu whēnua
Where the canoe touches the land
10th Early Childhood Convention 2011
26 - 29 April 2011
Otautahi Christchurch

Assessment in New Zealand early childhood settings

A proposal to change from Learning Stories to Learning Notes

Ken E. Blaiklock

Abstract

Although Learning Stories are widely used in New Zealand early childhood settings, there are doubts about the effectiveness of this assessment technique. A different approach to assessing young children, known as Learning Notes, is introduced in this article. Unlike Learning Stories, Learning Notes do not follow a story format or focus on dispositions to learn. Learning Notes can be used to provide an accurate description of an event, an interpretation of the learning that occurred, and ideas for future learning. When evaluated against key principles of observational assessment, it is argued that Learning Notes provide a more comprehensive and practical approach than is possible with Learning Stories.

Introduction

The assessment of young children's learning is a crucial area in early childhood education. High quality assessment is needed to support children's learning and to provide information on the effectiveness of early childhood programmes. The most common way of assessing young children's learning in New Zealand is through the use of Learning Stories but there are significant problems with this technique. This article outlines a new approach to assessment that I call Learning Notes. Learning Notes include a description of an event and optional sections that interpret the learning that occurred and suggest ideas for future learning. Learning Notes can be used for both formative and summative assessment. Because Learning Notes may be easier to record than Learning Stories, they can be produced more frequently. This should allow educators to carry out a range of assessments across key domains of learning for each child.

The use of Learning Stories to assess children's learning

During the last 10 years, Learning Stories have become the dominant form of assessment in early childhood centres in New Zealand (Education Review Office, 2007).

The technique of Learning Stories was largely developed by Margaret Carr (1998, 2001) and requires teachers to write narrative stories that interpret the learning that occurs in particular situations. There is a focus on describing dispositions to learn rather than on assessing knowledge and skills. Part of the reason for the success of Learning Stories is because they are said to be appropriate for assessing all young children in any type of learning experience. Stories may focus on individuals or groups of children. At the end of a Learning Story, a teacher writes a review that focuses on the learning that occurred, and provides ideas for future learning experiences (Carr, 2001).

Substantial amounts of government funding have been directed at providing resources and professional development courses to promote the use of Learning Stories in early childhood centres. Much of this funding has gone into the development of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, 20 booklets that provide exemplars of assessment using Learning Stories (Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009). The Education Review Office (2007) has supported the use of Learning Stories and has promoted their use in a wide range of centres. Currently, however, there is little empirical evidence that the widespread use of Learning Stories can be justified in terms of gains for children's learning.

I have written elsewhere about a wider range of concerns related to the use of Learning Stories as an assessment technique (Blaiklock, 2008; 2010). The concerns include:

- Problems with establishing the validity or credibility of Learning Stories
- A lack of guidance on what areas of learning to assess.
- Problems with defining the learning dispositions that are supposed to be the focus of Learning Stories.
- A lack of rationale for the links between particular learning dispositions and the strands of *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996).

- Problems in using Learning Stories to show changes in children's learning and development over time.
- Problems in using a Learning Story about a specific experience as a basis for planning future learning experiences in different contexts.

It is useful for teachers to be aware that it is not compulsory for centres to use Learning Stories when assessing children. The licensing criteria for early childhood services (Ministry of Education, 2009) state that services should be 'informed by assessment, planning, and evaluation (documented and undocumented) that demonstrates an understanding of children's learning, their interests, whānau, and life contexts' (p. 8). The type of assessment that centres choose is not prescribed.

Learning Notes: An alternative to Learning Stories

Having made several presentations about problems with Learning Stories, teachers have often asked me about what could be used as an alternative approach to assessment. I generally reply that we need to be cautious when assessing young children and should ensure that the techniques we use are manageable, are well supported by research, and have benefits for children. Although I have been critical of the way that observations are reported in Learning Stories, observations of children in authentic contexts should be the basis of any system of assessment of young children (see Bagnato, 2007; Brassard & Boehm, 2007). A different way of capturing observations, and a viable alternative to Learning Stories, is to use what I call 'Learning Notes'. In contrast to Learning Stories, Learning Notes do not focus on dispositions to learn but instead can be used to describe the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of children.

Learning Notes consist of three components: 'Describe'; 'Interpret'; and 'What Next?'. The 'Describe' section provides a description of a child's involvement in a particular learning experience. The description may be short (a sentence or two) or long (several paragraphs) and should be recorded as accurately as possible. Sometimes a photo of the child's involvement or work (e.g., a construction, a writing attempt, a piece of art) will be included. The description should be written at the time that the teacher observes the event or as soon as possible afterwards. Teachers can record their observations in a notebook or on 'post it' notes for later transfer into a child's individual record. Information that is recorded can include the child's name, place of event, time, other participants, knowledge, skill or attitude demonstrated, and examples of the language that occurred. The practicalities of recording observations while working with children may mean that only abbreviated details are recorded. A teacher can use these details to write a longer description later in the day if desired. The information that a teacher records can be affected by the teacher's own perception of the event (see Chapter 7 in McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2010). Teachers should try to be aware of the ways that personal bias could influence observations. The Describe section of

the Learning Note needs to be written in clear descriptive language with minimal interpretation. A useful question for a teacher to consider is 'would another observer describe the event in the way that I have?'

Sometimes a Learning Note will consist only of the Describe section. This may, for example, be all that is required to record a child's accomplishment in a particular area of learning and development. At other times, a teacher may find it useful to add an 'Interpret' section to the Learning Note in order to provide a comment that highlights the significance of the learning that a child demonstrated. This comment could be linked with a specific section of *Te Whāriki* or with other publications on children's learning and development.

Another optional component of a Learning Note is the 'What Next?' section. The teacher only needs to complete this when it is useful to document ideas for future experiences that follow on from what was observed. These ideas should be enacted as soon as possible after the observation. For example, a teacher who observes a child's new interest in a particular topic may make a note to extend the child's learning through introducing some new resources related to the topic.

Evaluating the worth of Learning Stories and Learning Notes in relation to principles of assessment

When evaluating different ways of assessing young children, it is important to examine the principles that underlie particular approaches to assessment. The principles that underlie the Learning Stories approach, as exemplified in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, are adopted from *Te Whāriki* and set out as a series of questions (Ministry of Education, 2007, Book 10, p. 6):

- Is the identity of the child as a competent and confident learner protected and enhanced by the assessments?
- Do the assessment practices take account of the whole child?
- Do the assessment practices invite the involvement of family and whānau?
- Are the assessments embedded in reciprocal and responsive relationships?

Affirmative answers can be given to all of these questions, for both Learning Stories and Learning Notes. The general nature of the questions, however, limits their usefulness for evaluating the worth of different assessment practices.

A more comprehensive and in-depth set of principles of observational assessment was recently developed following consultation between early childhood teachers and assessment experts in Britain (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The principles are as follows:

1. Assessment must have a purpose.

2. Ongoing observation of children in everyday activities is the most reliable way of building up an accurate picture of what children know, understand, feel, are interested in, and can do.
3. Practitioners should both plan observations and be ready to capture the spontaneous but important moments.
4. Judgement of children's development and learning must be based on skills, knowledge, understanding, and behaviour that are demonstrated consistently and independently.
5. Effective assessment takes equal account of all aspects of the child's development and learning.
6. Effective assessment takes account of contributions from a range of perspectives.
7. Assessments must actively engage parents in developing an accurate picture of their child's development.
8. Children must be fully involved in their own assessment.

These eight principles provide a useful framework for comparing the value of Learning Stories and Learning Notes. The following sections of this article discuss each of the principles in turn.

1. Assessment must have a purpose

Assessment is most commonly used for two purposes, formative and summative (Gullo, 2005). Formative assessment is an ongoing process and is sometimes referred to as 'assessment for learning' (Absolum, 2006). It is what occurs everyday as teachers work with children and observe their strengths, interests, and needs. Most of this occurs in an informal way and is not documented but teachers may choose to record information about some of what they observe. Teachers are constantly adapting their teaching in response to the information they gather through formative assessment. Documented observations can be useful for building up information about a particular child and can inform planning for future learning experiences.

Summative assessment is used to 'sum up' a child's performance in a particular area of learning and development at a particular time. Reporting against National Standards is an example of summative assessment at the primary school level. At the early childhood level there are no requirements for New Zealand teachers to conduct summative assessments. Such assessments may occur, however, when teachers wish to describe a child's performance in order to seek additional educational assistance (e.g., for a child who has special learning needs).

Learning Stories are designed as a formative assessment. A problem exists, however, in working out what they are intended to assess. Carr (2001) stated that Learning Stories should focus on children's dispositions for learning but the concept of dispositions is unclear. Learning dispositions

were defined by Carr as 'situated learning strategies plus motivation-participation repertoires from which a learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, searches for and constructs learning opportunities' (p. 21). This definition is open to many different interpretations. Carr (2001) suggests that teachers focus on how 'five domains of disposition are translated into actions: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, expressing a point of view or feeling, and taking responsibility'. Each domain of disposition is described in general terms of children 'being ready, being willing and being able' (pp. 24-25). It remains unclear as to what these dispositions are, whether they can be assessed, and how teachers are supposed to identify progress in these dispositions for individual children from birth to five years of age.

"It is a questionable practice to rely on Learning Stories as a base for individualised planning of future learning experiences."

Formative assessments should contribute to planning future learning experiences. This poses a challenge for Learning Stories because they are situation specific and are usually made infrequently. The published guidelines on Learning Stories (Carr, 1998, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009) do not suggest how often to make Learning Stories but the considerable time required to produce each Learning Story means that a common practice in early childhood centres is to produce just one Learning Story per child per month. Each Learning Story is specific to a particular event and is only a small sample of a child's experiences at the centre. It is therefore a questionable practice to rely on Learning Stories as a base for individualised planning of future learning experiences.

The flexibility and ease of recording Learning Notes means that they should be of more value for planning than are Learning Stories. Because Learning Notes do not have to follow a story format, they can be recorded far more frequently than is possible with Learning Stories; teachers may find that they can record several brief Learning Notes for each child every week. Teachers can write short Learning Notes while they are working with children and can therefore capture a wider range of experiences. Ideas for future learning experiences (e.g., in response to a particular interest of a child) can be followed up that day or the next. This is in contrast to the writing of Learning Stories where there may be a time delay of several weeks between initial observation, writing up of the Learning Story, and implementation of suggestions for future experiences.

Learning Notes can also contribute to summative assessment. Teachers can record information that shows children's achievements in particular areas of learning.

This information could be linked to the goals and learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki*. However, the generalised nature of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, along with its lack of information about developmental change in key areas of learning (e.g., physical development, language development) is problematic for teachers who wish to record progress in children's learning. For these reasons, New Zealand educators may find it useful to examine international developments in early childhood curriculum development. For example, The Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008), recently developed after extensive consultation in the UK, provides a useful description of key areas of children's learning in the early childhood years.

2. Ongoing observation of children in everyday activities is the most reliable way of building up an accurate picture of what children know, understand, feel, are interested in, and can do.

As noted above, the more frequent documentation that is available with the use of Learning Notes allows teachers to build up a more comprehensive record of a child's learning and development than is possible with Learning Stories. A Learning Story, as the name suggests, is meant to tell a story. Carr's guidelines for writing Learning Stories suggest that teachers watch out for a set order of behaviours. Carr (1998) stated, 'within a particular activity or interest, the behaviours often appear in sequence – hence the name 'Learning Story' for the package of behaviours' (p. 15). The sequence is as follows:

- (1) Taking an interest;
- (2) Being involved;
- (3) Persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty;
- (4) Expressing a point of view or feeling; and
- (5) Taking responsibility.

The problem with this advice is that a teacher may feel obliged to record information that fits this sequence even if what is observed follows a different pattern. (e.g., a child may actually 'express a point of view' before 'persisting with difficulty'). Learning Notes do not impose the constraints of a 'story sequence' and hence allow teachers to focus on accurate recording of the event.

Accuracy of recording is crucial when making observations; a point made in many publications on assessment of young children (e.g., Brassard & Boehm, 2007; Fawcett, 2009; Gullo, 2005). Although all teachers may be influenced by preconceived ideas, they should strive to be as accurate as possible when carrying out observations (Martin, 2007; National Research Council, 2008). The Describe section of Learning Notes should be written in clear descriptive language. Interpretation and professional judgements can then be made in the Interpret section. A difficulty with Learning Stories is that teachers are not advised on the importance of objectivity when first describing a child's learning experiences. Indeed, advocates

of Learning Stories suggest that this type of assessment is 'less concerned with keeping interpretation out of recording', and note that 'it is generally more interesting and engaging to read a [learning] story than an anecdotal or running record account' (Hatherly & Sands, 2002, p.9).

3. Practitioners should both plan observations and be ready to capture the spontaneous but important moments.

4. Judgement of children's development and learning must be based on skills, knowledge, understanding, and behaviour that are demonstrated consistently and independently.

5. Effective assessment takes equal account of all aspects of the child's development and learning.

Published guidelines on Learning Stories (Carr, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009) make no mention of the need to carry out both planned and spontaneous observations. Guidance on what to assess is often phrased in very general terms. For example, the introductory booklet for the *Kei Tua o te Pae* series (Book 1) stated that assessment is described as 'noticing, recognising, and responding'. 'Teachers *notice* a great deal as they work with children, and they *recognise* some of what they notice as 'learning'. They will *respond* to a selection of what they recognise' (p. 6). With regards to what learning is important, the introductory booklet refers to the strands of *Te Whāriki*.

Teachers who use Learning Notes can make spontaneous and planned observations. Spontaneous observations are appropriate when teachers are working with children and recognise significant moments in children's learning. Recognising these moments is enhanced when teachers have knowledge of developmental pathways in children's learning. Information that highlights the significance of a child's learning can be included in the Interpret section of a Learning Note. Here a teacher may choose to make links with the strands and indicative learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki*. Again, the lack of information in *Te Whāriki* on developmental progressions (e.g. language or physical development) limits the value of this document for interpreting the significance of particular learning events.

As an alternative to linking with *Te Whāriki*, teachers may find it helpful to make use of more recent approaches to early childhood curriculum. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) resources (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008), developed after extensive consultation in the UK, provides a very different approach to *Te Whāriki*. Detailed information is provided on six domains of learning and development: Personal; Social and Emotional Development; Communication; Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development. Each of the six domains is further divided into more specific areas (e.g., Physical Development is subdivided into Movement and Space, Health and Bodily Awareness, and Using Equipment and

Materials). Information is provided about developmental progressions in each area along with pointers on what it is useful for teachers to observe. Ideas are provided on effective practice to further extend children's learning in each area.

Although children learn in a holistic way, it can be valuable for teachers to be aware of major domains of learning to ensure that none of these areas is neglected in teaching and assessment. Linking Learning Notes to the domains and areas of learning in the EYFS would be one way to ensure that teachers build up a comprehensive picture of each child's learning. This would facilitate the planning of learning experiences to further extend children's learning. Using a framework such as the EYFS can help teachers to become more aware of when key domains of learning have not been assessed for individual children. On realising this, teachers can plan to carry out observations and record Learning Notes to cover these learning areas.

In contrast, guidelines on Learning Stories (Carr, 1998, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009) do not consider the need to ensure assessment of key domains of learning. Consequently, it is quite likely that no assessments are made of crucial learning areas (e.g., physical development, language development) for many of the children who are enrolled in New Zealand early childhood services. The lack of assessment of these areas is a particular concern for children with marked developmental delays because it may mean that these children miss out on opportunities for additional educational assistance.

6. Effective assessment takes account of contributions from a range of perspectives.

7. Assessments must actively engage parents in developing an accurate picture of their child's development.

8. Children must be fully involved in their own assessment.

Because interpretation may occur at the time a teacher records a Learning Story, it can be difficult for other staff members to provide different perspectives on the event that is documented. Ensuring that initial observations are made as accurately as possible, as recommended for Learning Notes, makes it easier for other staff to provide interpretations. The more frequent documentation that is possible with Learning Notes in comparison to Learning Stories also makes it easier to have opportunities for contributions from a range of teachers.

In most early childhood centres, Learning Stories are added to children's individual portfolios and are available for parents to view and comment on. Some centres include a form entitled 'Parents' Voice' as a way of requesting parents to make written comments related to the Learning Story (Carr, 2001).

A similar approach can be used for Learning Notes. These can be filed in children's portfolios along with photos of learning events and examples of children's work (e.g.,

a photo of an event or a painting). Parents can be invited to discuss the portfolios with children and teachers and to make written comments if possible. Sending portfolios home can also be a way of requesting parents to provide information about a child's interests and learning in the home setting.

Because Learning Notes can be brief (e.g., a sentence describing a child's accomplishment) they require less time and work to produce than Learning Stories. This means that Learning Notes have an immediacy that is often not found with Learning Stories. A Learning Note about a child's new achievement or interest can be written in the morning and followed-up by the teacher with related experiences that same day. A Learning Note describing what happened can be sent home so that the child and parent can discuss the event at a time when it is still of particular significance. When Learning Notes are kept in portfolios, they are ideal as conversation starters for teachers and parents to talk with children about past events and to make links with other experiences in children's lives. Such conversations are valuable for facilitating language development (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002).

Children can be involved at the time of writing a Learning Note. A teacher can inform a child when the teacher notices something to document. The teacher can talk to the child about the learning experience and listen to the child's perspective. If a photo is taken, it can be immediately printed out and discussed with the child. When a Learning Note is written up in more detail after the event, the teacher can relate the information to the child and ask for further comments. Writing a Learning Note with a child is an ideal way to develop understandings of literacy.

Conclusion

Although Learning Stories have become the dominant, and often the only, form of assessment in New Zealand early childhood centres, there is little evidence that they are an effective way of assessing and enhancing young children's learning. One reason for the dominance of this approach to assessment may be due to the large amounts of government funding that has gone into providing resources and professional development related to Learning Stories. In this article I have suggested that Learning Notes offer a more effective and comprehensive way of assessing young children's learning than is possible with Learning Stories. I would recommend that teachers try out the use of Learning Notes so that they may examine whether this approach to assessment can have real benefits in early childhood centres. It is to be hoped that the Ministry of Education will support research into comparing the effectiveness of Learning Notes and Learning Stories in order to see which approach is most practicable and effective for assessing and enhancing children's learning.

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Read-a-thons

Promoting books at Wesley Kindergarten

Maryrose Doull

Although I have recently retired, I am still very interested in early childhood. When Jenny Perry, the head teacher at Wesley Kindergarten said she wanted to share her Read-a-thon programme, I offered to interview her and write an article. In part I have been a ghost writer and sometimes I have simply reported Jenny's words. I hope this article shows that we are both very enthusiastic about books and early learning.

At Wesley Kindergarten in Mt Roskill, Auckland, they have regularly held two to three Read-a-thons each year for the past six years.

My first question to Jenny Perry was: *why have a Read-a-thon?* Her first reply was that she wanted to get children more interested in books and to get parents and whānau reading more often to children.

Where did the idea come from? Jenny replied; "I dreamt it up to encourage more interest in books amongst children, parents and whānau. I remember from the very first occasion being blown away by the success of it and have regularly included it in the yearly programme ever since."

The Read-a-thon becomes a focus of interest two or three times a year. Children are encouraged to have an adult read to them individually or in small groups as often as possible during the session at kindergarten.

Parents are informed by newsletter of the purpose and nature of the event. Displays (including photographs of adults reading to children) remind them to stop and read to their child. Children usually choose the book, they want read to them. For each book read, they receive a stamp on the reading wall-chart and then a certificate for every 10 stamps. A record of the families' participation is kept in the child's portfolio with photographs.

Stamps are only awarded for reading at the kindergarten. The Read-a-thon lasts about 6-8 weeks usually coming to a natural conclusion at the end of term. Certificates are very popular and are also awarded to everyone, who stays to read to their child. In this way Jenny achieves her first goal of getting children and families interested in reading stories more often at the kindergarten.

Why certificates?

Jenny was initially surprised that receiving a certificate is such an important part of the Read-a-thon. Here are her thoughts about this;

"We all like tangible rewards. They see siblings in school

getting certificates. When the child has earned a certificate it is handed out at mat-time at the end of the session. The child comes up to the front, the teacher shakes their hand and gives them the certificate and their friends all clap. The parents certainly like to see their children up the front at mat-time receiving a certificate. This aspect is far more important than I ever anticipated. The children also present certificates to their parent or family member. I'm not sure why certificates are so important. Is it just because we all like tangible rewards? Maybe some parents haven't received many certificates during their own schooling."

The teachers are also providing information to parents about the importance of early literacy. This is done through displays, leaflets and the children's portfolios.

Theoretical background

This programme is based firmly in the four principles of *Te Whāriki*. *Family and Community involvement* are

Reading at kindergarten

Reading and enjoying stories with adults is an important part of the kindergarten curriculum.

When we take time to read to children we help develop their imagination and language skills such as new words and how words are linked together to communicate ideas. We also promote listening and comprehension skills.

When we read to children we also help them gain the skills they need for being a successful reader at primary school such as:

- That books are fun and can help us learn interesting things.
- That a book contains words and pictures.
- That these words are what is read.
- That a book has a beginning and an end, a front and a back.
- How to care for books.

**Ma te huruhuru te manu ka rere
It is the feathers that enable the bird to fly**

at the centre of this literacy programme. *Relationships* are vital; those between reader and listener, the one who asks for the story and the one, who responds. The principle of *relationships* also highlights the importance of educators providing a literacy-rich and socially stimulating environment which provides children with ample opportunities to engage meaningfully with a wide range of literary tools and props' (Hamer & Adams, 2003, p. 33).

Opportunities to role play stories also contribute to *holistic development*. Children are *empowered* to master spoken and written forms of English. They are recognised as active and capable participants, sharing book learning. (Ministry of Education, 1996). We also know that story book reading has traditionally been used for supporting literacy knowledge and skills and experience of story reading predicts later reading achievement (Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka & Hunt, 2009). Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) theory and the importance of access and mediation to promote learning, this kindergarten provides children with both access to a literacy rich environment and mediation of the multiple ways in which literacy is used. What children learn first through social interaction and shared experience on the social plane, they internalise and transform into their own interpersonal understandings of literacy. As Hamer and Adams (2003, p. 13) so clearly state: "The experiences, practices, attitudes and knowledge encountered in their early years across a range of settings which contribute to children understanding, enjoying, engaging with and using oral, visual and written language and symbols of their own and other cultures to express their individual identity and allow them to become active participants in a literate society.

Socio-cultural background

The success of the Read-a-thon comes out of the culture and practice at Wesley Kindergarten and from the particular needs of these children and families. About half the children are from Pacific Island families. The others are from Pakeha, Māori, Indian, Pakistani, African and Asian families. Wesley is largely a Housing New Zealand Community. The Neighbouring school is classified as decile one, so this is a predominately low income community, with many children learning English as another language.

Wesley Kindergarten is a public kindergarten in Mt. Roskill, a suburb of Auckland. There are two teachers. They offer two sessions a day for two groups of 30 children, not an all day service.

Jenny is aware that their families are very busy. She says, "We know that some parents find it hard to find time to read at kindergarten but the Read-a-thon is an incentive to find five or ten minutes in the day, at least once or twice during the Read-a-thon. We encourage but don't pressurize adults to read. We know that some of our refugee parents have not had the opportunity to become literate because they haven't had any or much formal schooling and others may struggle or not read for pleasure themselves. Therefore, we have plenty of books with simple text available. Most children find someone in the whānau who can come and

read maybe an older sibling or cousin. We have a good range of books in Pacific Island languages available (thanks to Learning Media). We have a few in other languages, not many as they are expensive and there are not many available in the languages of our community."

Jenny is particularly concerned that some children have little experience with print in the home. As many of the children are learning English as another language, it can be difficult for teachers and children to develop shared language experiences. Shared language experiences are built up through activities in the kindergarten and on outings together as well, but sharing stories seems to be something special.

Family/Whānau are made very welcome at the kindergarten and often stay, when children are attending afternoon sessions. Not so many stay for the morning sessions. However, most parents stayed to read a story or more during the Read-a-thon.

Core books

The Read-a-thon is only part of their Early Literacy programme. The kindergarten has a list of core books that are always available (other books on display are changed every couple of weeks). This list of core books contains the children's favourite stories. Some titles may be added or deleted as their interests change but essentially these are the perennial favourites.

Jenny expects that all the children will become very familiar with the Core Books.

Other resources are available, so that the children can dramatise these stories. For example, for *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, there are puppets, dress-up costumes and a magnetic story. There are duplicate copies of the book and it is available in the Take-home Library. Jenny wants the stories and the characters to become part of the children's lives. *Mrs Wishy-Washy* and other story book characters have become part of the centre's culture.

List of core books

Owl babies
Handa's surprise
The big block of chocolate
The fizzy orange soft drink
Mr. Gumpy's outing
The three billy goats gruff
Mrs. Wishy Washy
The very hungry caterpillar
The gingerbread biscuit
The pig in the pond
Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's dairy
Goldilocks and the three bears

Jenny said, “I want the children to develop a love of reading. I want the centre to have a culture of shared stories because I think favourite book characters are like old friends. Shared experiences and shared stories are avenues for enriching children’s language, e.g. the gingerbread biscuits at the dough table or in dramatic play to be the troll under the bridge or a bear in a cave. The children can identify with the characters through their play. With our use of core books and the Read-a-thon it is amazing how quickly this happens. Even children who are learning English as another language are often keen to participate. They may not be speaking much English in conversation but will pick up familiar phrases in favourite stories. I love to see the way children’s faces light up with the pleasure of familiar stories.”

The local librarian has a commitment to work with the kindergarten. She visits the kindergarten and the children also visit the library; a very useful link into the outside community. The kindergarten also has a take home library that the children access once a week.

Informal evaluation

Now I want to move to a deeper level to look at the value of reading books. Jenny feels that books offer a special experience for children. Reading and being read to offer opportunities to enrich language, to be playful and creative. Enriching children’s language is one of the stated aims at Wesley. It is an intimate and individualized experience. She thinks enriching children’s language experiences and encouraging an interest in books is one of the ways we can help children from Wesley to be successful in the education system.

Sharing stories is also used to promote social competence; conversation develops around stories, shy children have a way of joining in, richer language is used in play and fantasy play is encouraged. Playing with words and ideas is fun and a great way to learn.

Now the children are in the middle of a new Read-a-thon so Jenny took the time to talk with some of them about their experiences of being read stories. These results of these discussions are summarized in her own words:

“It’s difficult to ascertain how many parents or whānau are reading to their children at home. To investigate this I talked individually with 16 children during a morning session. I was pleasantly surprised to find most children confirmed a parent, grandparent or sibling read to them, (I don’t know how often). However, the responses led me to wonder about the quality of some of the books read to the children. Some examples mentioned by the children were Toy Story, The princess one, Scooby Doo’.

All of the children I surveyed could very easily list one or more favourite kindergarten books and contribute some discussion about why it was a favourite or talk about some aspect of the story. I was delighted by these findings as it confirms for me the Read-a-thon is a good use of teacher time and energies.



Reading together crosses the generations. Fahina Taufuou reads to her granddaughter Youko Kawaguchi as part of the Wesley Kindergarten Read-a-thon.

I also know the Read-a-thon has been a success when I see children reading and enjoying books themselves or with other children. The children ask adults to read to them and the adults are taking more interest in reading to children.”

Conclusion

The Read-a-thon ensures teachers and others are taking time to read to children. It ensures every child is read to individually at some time. There is an ongoing influence, even after the Read-a-thon has finished child ask for stories or ‘read’ to themselves. Some children are ‘reading’ to themselves because they are so familiar with some stories.”

In these many different ways the Read-a-thon has become central to the lives of the children and the culture of Wesley Kindergarten. Parents and family are being involved in helping their kindergarten children to enjoy books and learning. Hopefully this will build their confidence in their ability to support their children’s learning in the future.

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Who will look after my child?

The complexities of working with the families of children with special needs

Amanda Fourie

For many years I worked with the families of children who have special educational, developmental and learning needs, and I became very aware of the challenges that they face. Working alongside them, I was also challenged. This article is about those challenges.

Because parents wait with excitement for their special new baby to arrive, it is easy to see why it can take a lot of persuasion for them to accept that their child could possibly have a neurological or developmental disorder. This is especially true if the disorder is not obvious.

A child with special educational needs is a child who needs extra support because of 'a physical disability, a sensory impairment, a learning or communication delay, a social, emotional or behavioural difficulty, or a combination of these' (Ministry of Education, Special Education, as cited by Alliston, 2007, p. 1).

Supporting a child in need can be as simple as providing a speech language therapist or an early intervention teacher, but it can be much more complex. Families may be required to engage a range of professionals as well as various government departments.

Labels

Early intervention teams work with the child's specific disorders and developmental delays with or without a label. However identifying a child as having a special need often involves accepting a label which can be to the child's disadvantage. Children develop in different ways and some who could be identified as having a disability can 'catch up' with their peers in a relatively short time. But the label, once given to a child, can persist.

Many parents have told me that negative comments about a child places the family under stress and also affects the child's self-image. Hurtful language from uninformed people using words such as: 'retard', 'dumb', 'slow' or 'simple minded' can result in parents being unwilling to attend social gatherings and meetings in public places.

Sharing information is not always welcome. Some parents know their child has a disorder or disability and specifically do not want to mention it to early childhood teachers. They

do not want their child to be treated differently from any other with individual support systems or special education staff to guide their learning. This has an implication for when the child starts school. There is a question on the enrolment form that specifically asks whether a child has received any special education in the past.

However, I have found that some parents prefer to not disclose any such information. Parents feel that they want to give their child equal opportunity with peers, to achieve without teacher prejudice influencing educational outcomes. One parent told me that her girl 'walks to her own drum beat and couldn't care less about the rest of the group'. She felt that she was a little like that herself and would not want her child to be any different. She said she wanted teachers to love and care for her child just as they do for any other child, despite her child's quirky behaviours.

This raises moral issues for educational support and teaching staff who cannot disclose any information without parental consent. This is especially sad when a child with autism who, despite having no verbal language and with severe behavioural issues, enters a learning environment without specialist support. When this happens, questions need to be asked, such as 'whose interests are being served?' And 'where is the child's voice, if the parent is not making sensible decisions?' Teachers will in any case quickly notice something is amiss and nondisclosure simply delays the process where a child might have benefitted from extra funding for support from the Ministry of Education.

When a child has more obvious special needs, parents are often more accepting of the situation. Some parents become wonderful advocates for their children; they become familiar with the law and know every service available to them for their child's well being. Some parents welcome new information and are proactive in seeking out the support and guidance for their child's educational and developmental learning outcomes. Their positive attitude usually has positive outcomes for the child and all the parties involved with the child.

It is essential that early childhood teachers have a very good understanding of what typical behaviours and skills are within a normal range of quirkiness and idiosyncrasies for

the expected age group they work with. Some children start at early childhood services with developmental delays or neurological disorders that need to be recognised and addressed urgently. Research studies such as those from The Incredible Years or Triple P parenting programmes show that early intervention in most cases has better outcomes for the child and their families (Incredible Years, 2010; Triple P, 2010). It is essential that teachers know how to recognise 'red flags' in areas of development and when to raise concerns about a child.

Some parents express relief when they realise that their concerns are also being noticed by teachers, and that something can be done about them. However, teachers need to be alert to the fact that some parents can experience anger, denial and grief when concerns are raised about their child. These emotions are part of the grieving cycle which is likely to continue for many years (Anderegg, Vergason & Smith, 1992). One parent told me that whenever her child hits a milestone, it is like remembering a lost dream.

Culture matters

Disabilities are understood differently in different cultures. I have found some parents who isolate their disabled child from society; otherwise they will 'lose face'. Sometimes when family members visit from overseas, Special Educational support staff have been asked to stop their services, because the family has not informed their relatives of their child's disabilities. Some believe

What a parent would like early childhood teachers and students to consider

Parent A has a Son B. He has autism and cognitive delay. It is very hard to engage Son B in any interactions, play or participation in group activities. He is constantly on the move and puts objects in his mouth. He is still in the sensory motor play stage and functions in his development as a child of nearly two years, even though he is nearly five years old.

Parent A wanted teachers and students to know how hard it was for her to give up her career, to become a 'stay at home mum' and deal on a 24/7 basis with the need to supervise this precious little boy. She has also no prospect of joining the workforce in the foreseeable future.

Son B has siblings and his behaviours have a huge impact on the whole family. It embarrasses them when he masturbates in public and when he has loud meltdowns for no obvious reasons. This affects the family planning for trips and visits to others in the community for shopping, family events and religious participation. Parent A felt she also wanted her child to have the opportunity to get invited to birthday parties.

Parent A wanted to see parents and teachers show compassion and understanding when her child is around. It hurts Parent A when others make comments that her child is 'naughty' or she is a 'bad' mother for letting her child 'run wild'. Son B is very adventurous. He has no concept of safety issues around cars, streets, climbing, electricity or fire and has an intense interest in all of it. He thinks it is a game if he runs away in the parking lot. He has opened the car door on the motorway, has got out of his car seat, unlocked the doors and windows; driving with him is dangerous. He also recently broke the TV, DVD player and dishwasher knobs.

Parent A and her husband are worried about Son B; how they will be able to provide for him financially in future? They are exhausted as Son B only sleeps about three hours at any time and is then awake for up to three hours on the go despite various herbal sleeping supports.

Both Parent A and her husband worry about schooling and what school would be best for their little boy. For now they do not see how he will be able to attend a mainstream school and are looking at special school units in their area. A psychologist, early intervention teacher and speech and language teacher will support them in their choice.

Concerns about schooling that Parent A raised:

- 'In a mainstream school, how can my child survive a day with no more than two or three hours support each day? Who will look after him? As he is such a safety risk for climbing, running away, choking and biting, who will provide one on one support him? What am I supposed to do with him for the rest of the day? Will I have to look after him for the rest of his schooling years?'
- 'Who will look after my child if the teachers are on lunch break or morning tea in a mainstream school? Who will change his nappy? Will he be bullied and teased?'
- 'The special school unit looks like a jail. The special school classrooms are so bare to minimize distractions for other children with Autism, but my child needs a highly colourful and visual learning environment. What if he starts to copy and imitate some of the sounds and repetitive actions the other children with Autism make?'

it is a 'punishment from God' if they have a child with a special need.

Teachers have to acknowledge these feelings that parents have, encourage them to say it is 'okay' to have a child with a disability, as well as to teach our children from a young age to be accepting of all people, no matter what they look like, how they function or what they can do. For the educational support team members 'best practice' is shown in 'their respect for the uniqueness of each context, valuing of people, and acknowledging the views and perspectives of others' (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.6).

There are also Maori and Pasifica Team Advisors available for intervention team members and families to consult with if needed 'to build active strong relationships (whaka-whanau-nga) with respect (whaka-mana) and active listening (whaka-rongo), teamwork (whaka-ngatahi), inclusion (whaka-uru) and sensitivity (whaka-tutohu)' (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.33).

"The level of educational support received for the children with special needs impacts directly on families"

Parents usually want to normalise the child with special needs within their family, and every member of the family has a role to play in doing so. This can put a lot of pressure on siblings who take on responsibilities for their sibling which are far ahead of what is expected of their peers. The family can form such a close knit bond around the child that the wider family may be unaware of difficulties that arise. When teachers raise concerns about a child, some parents choose to move the child to a different setting. This can delay early interventions that could have made a positive difference in the overall outcomes for the child. Some children with behaviour issues might be asked to leave the early childhood centre; their parents may not enroll them in another educational setting, preferring to wait until the child is old enough for school. However behaviour issues need to be addressed as soon as possible. Ministry of Education, Special Education (MoE, SE) is providing very successful Incredible Years parenting programmes (Incredible Years, 2010) to support parents and teachers dealing with children whose behaviour is difficult or challenging.

Early intervention and inclusive education

When an early intervention teacher becomes involved with a family, she/he will do an assessment of the child's holistic development and this will be done over several visits in different settings. It may also include the observations from teachers and parents or other specialists or therapists. They will then sit together and discuss the findings to

create an Individual Plan with specific learning outcomes that will support the child. The focus is always positive and from a strength-based approach. The support materials used will be evidenced based and a range of well researched internationally recognised programmes are used. Progress will be monitored and a review of goals set will take place in consultation with parents/whanau and teachers. When a child has reached their learning goals, the case will be closed or referred, if necessary for more intensive support. Sometimes intervention teams support a child through transitioning to an early childhood centre or to school.

Inclusive practice involves the commitment of everyone to share responsibility for the sense of well-being and belonging for everyone in that community: all families, educators and government agencies. That means that 'obstacles' need to be addressed. These obstacles could be:

- a lack of funding to provide the necessary equitable hours of care and educational support needed for the child to be with their peers;
- physical or emotional difficulties that cause tiredness or lack of concentration;
- lack of suitable classrooms, resources, chairs, beds or toileting facilities;
- adults' attitudes; for example, over protectiveness or lack of interest in the child.

Two children with similar disabilities and abilities can have very different outcomes at the same age depending on parenting styles and attitudes. Some parents treat the child with special needs like any other child; they encourage independence and self help skills from an early age. This mindset carries through to independent thinking, doing and learning. Others see their child as 'helpless'.

For the early childhood teacher, or the educational support worker, there can be a dilemma about how and when to intervene as these decisions rest firmly with what parents want for their children. Against advice from educational and/or medical specialists, some parents make unsuitable choices for the child; e.g. choosing an unsuitable wheelchair or disregarding physio exercises following surgery. These choices can leave the child with little benefit and at such times, it becomes very difficult to stand back and say nothing, as the parental choice overrides the opinions from any teacher.

Despite legal requirements that children with special needs 'have the same rights to enroll and receive education at state schools', (New Zealand Government, 1989, p. 40) and research showing that *all* learners could benefit from the same strategies that are offered for learners with special educational needs (Margrain & Clements, 2007), not all principals and head teachers are welcoming parents with children with special educational needs. This can cause a lot of heartache to families who are already stressed and apprehensive.

Although a child with the cognitive ability of a three

year old can start school at age five, it is nearly impossible to keep the child on the same curriculum outcomes as their peers. I have observed that in school settings, teachers struggle to adequately adapt their planning to accommodate the young child with special needs. Often the only adult in the room, a teacher can find it impossible to control the class if one or two children want to run and play while the others have to sit quietly.

Many parents ask that their child with special needs stay on in an early childhood setting until they are legally required to start school at the age of six. A special letter is required to do so to show a prolonged transition process from the early childhood setting to the school.

Those parents who choose to home school, or place their children in special units at mainstream schools, still have access to MOE, SE support services, such as speech, physio and occupational therapists.

Supporting families

The level of educational support received for the children with special needs impacts directly on families. One mother told me that it shaped her choices in life. She is highly qualified and, because of her child's high needs, she is unable to re-enter the workforce. No one will employ her for the two hours and 15 minutes that her child has educational support at kindergarten. The child's disability is such that she requires continuous 1:1 supervision. This parent worries about the future of her child and despairs whether she will ever have a life of her own. Among families with children who have special needs, the stress levels are high; it seems that we often deal with families who divorce, are in financial strife and have depression.

When children qualify for on-going support services and have supportive schools with supportive friendly staff with accommodating attitudes, life is so much easier for families. Many families who have had successful support have told me about the relief they felt that their child was well cared for, safe and able to engage in meaningful learning with their peers.

The best ways to support families and their children are to **listen** to their needs, to hear what they want and to provide them with information to find support from the most suitable agencies.

John Angus, Children's Commissioner, has stated that a cultural change of attitudes to the name 'special education' might be needed (Patton, 2010). We teachers can make a start by looking at our own attitudes. Social systems at home, at school and in wider community influence our thinking about children with special needs.

Maybe it is time we look inside ourselves at how we can make life a little easier for these parents and their children. As teachers our role is to educate so that everyone – no matter what happened to them or where they are in their learning journey – can be included.

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Review questions for teachers

- How well are you able to adapt teaching methods to support young learners of all cognitive and developmental abilities?
- What learning styles, views and attitudes are you taking into consideration when you plan activities or respond to 'teachable moments'?
- How often do you include pictures, discussions or stories of children with disabilities in your daily/ weekly planning?
- How well do you address your own biases in cultural perceptions, prejudices and attitudes in the presentation of your learning resources, stories and activities? For example, in wall displays, choice of topics and follow up of children's emergent interests.

Managing the squeeze?

Six responses to the funding cuts

Compiled by Sue Stover

In the May 2010 budget announcements, existing incentives for hiring qualified early childhood teachers were significantly cut from February 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2010). As a result, there are significant funding shortfalls for many early childhood centres, especially for those services with more than 80% of their teaching staff fully qualified.

A recent survey of 199 e.c.e. centres found that 45% of early childhood centres expected to lose over 10% of their government funding, which equated to between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per year. 75% of centres planned to increase fees, and over 1000 pre-school age children had already left e.c.e. services, with respondents predicting more families to reduce hours or to not use e.c.e. services (Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/NZ Childcare Association, 2010).

For those managing early childhood centres, the funding cuts have required difficult decisions. Some have embarked on extensive consultation processes. To illustrate the decisions required of early childhood management, six early childhood services agreed to share their responses to the funding cuts.

All six services were deeply challenged by the reduction in funding; some used words like 'going backwards', 'disappointed', 'heavy heart', 'dismay', and 'disbelief' to describe their responses to the funding cuts. Particularly important was the loss of direction embodied in the now apparently 'cast aside' government strategic plan for a professionally-staffed early childhood educational sector (Ministry of Education, 2002). The personal impact was also evident; one service described staff as nervous, especially those still in training. Another described how a nearly qualified teacher could not complete her last practicum because the centre was unable to adequately support her financially.

Several pointed to multiple financial pressures which were hitting them, including the October rise in GST, and likely reduction in support from Work and Income New Zealand. While five of the six services were working to maintain currently high levels of fully trained staff, only the Ruahine Kindergarten Association 'remains committed' to 'not pass on any shortfalls at this time to our parents'. One service with four centres plans to cover its \$50,000+ per centre shortfall by increasing parent fees by 25%. Group size is going up in some centres, and while retaining better than minimum teacher:child ratios is planned by most, some are planning to reduce the use of relievers when teachers are away.

From Jan Tauoma of the Ao'ga Fa'asamoa, Auckland

I work in a Samoan Immersion centre, Aoga Fa'a Samoa, which finally achieved 100% qualified this year. Where to from here for us? Well we will still be working to our philosophy to provide children with trained registered teachers, but this will come at a cost. We will have no option but to make some budget changes and to increase our fees.

We tried to make this as easy as possible for our parents by increasing in small stages, (starting from January 2011), rather than one big jump. For families who have three children attending our centre this will have a huge impact especially, if due to the lowering of the WINZ subsidy from September, they can no longer access this assistance as well. Increasing fees will inevitably decrease participation from our community; already they are facing financial hardship and an increase in fees would mean the difference in being able to provide adequate food or power for their families.

So far one parent has reduced the days of enrollment for her child. When the fee change starts in 2011, hopefully it won't result in others reducing days, as being a language based centre it is important for children to have as much exposure to language as possible.

I do hope we do not have to go back to those exhausting times of fundraising that was so much a part of ECE in the 1990's.

The latest Pasifika education report (Statistics New Zealand and the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010), has shown Pasifika children are struggling in education. In 2007, the Education Review Office reported that within Pasifika e.c.e. services there was insufficient encouragement of questioning and critical thinking, and that a quarter of the services may be using formal literacy and numeracy exercises that are not appropriate for young children. While the Education Review Office (2007) identified many areas of improvement between 2004 and 2007, they also found that in most cases the teaching and learning practices and environments in Pacific services did not adequately support sustained, complex play and learning, or the critical and creative thinking that are essential for success at school. They also found that 'teaching qualifications are an important indicator of the likely quality of teaching and learning interactions in these centres' (Statistics New Zealand

& Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010, p. 19).

The Government states that 'participation' is its goal especially for Pasifika children as they are shown to be the least group participating in early childhood education.

How will this be achieved when the funding cuts and the lowering of the WINZ subsidies will inevitably result in parents having to deal with higher costs of fees and lesser subsidy to assist? Parents will look for alternatives and lower even more Pasifika children's chances to a better start in our education system.

From Faith Martin of Massey Childcare Centre, Palmerston North

Strategic financial decisions that Management has made in response to the announcements are motivated by a commitment to continue to provide the highest quality care to all the children who attend. The emphasis has been on keeping fee increases as low as possible and maintaining staff at the current levels. We are prepared to operate at a loss for possibly two years while the effects of the funding changes and our strategies to overcome them are known.

But there will be changes in 2011. The two that cause us most regret are being forced to increase the group size in each section to increase revenue and reverting back to a staffing profile that reduces the number of qualified registered teachers in the centre. The latter will be achieved over time as attrition occurs. Pay parity salary increases have been put on hold for 2011 and staff will have to contend with extra workload at times because of a reduction in using relieving staff. For parents the budget announcements will mean a 5% fee increase plus a higher subscription fee to offset costs such as sun block, wet wipes, tissues, transportation for outings and administration; all expenses we can no longer absorb.

From Jane Struthers of Green Street Early Childhood Centre, Dunedin

Through consultation with our centre whaanau, discussions with the committee and teachers our centre has decided to retain qualified registered teachers for our core teaching team but where possible, not replace teachers or employ untrained teachers as relievers.

We also have extended both houses so that the numbers have gone up in each house from 23 children to 25 per

day in H11, House 13 is now at 30 children. This means that we are increasing our revenue especially in H11 where we have gone from 10 unders to 12 unders.

We have started a Friends of the Centre to help with fundraising as well as fees have gone up \$1.05 an hour to help with the loss of revenue.

Teachers are being encouraged to take leave over the holiday periods when our numbers are potentially lower so relievers are not needed.

From Gaylyn Campbell of Ruahine Kindergarten Association, Palmerston North

By reducing the funding available to support the provision of 100% qualified teachers the Government is showing a lack of understanding, or simply refusing to acknowledge the role that early childhood education plays in supporting children to become confident learners able to reach their fullest potential and contribute positively to our society.

The Ruahine Kindergarten Association remains committed to maintaining 100% qualified teaching teams in all of our kindergartens, and has clearly said that we will not pass on any shortfalls at this time to our parents, that arise from the funding reductions. This is a huge challenge for the Association, and will not be easy. It will require us to take a long hard look at how we operate, and consider how efficiencies can be achieved, without affecting the quality educational experience that our children deserve. It is certain that at times this may be a painful process, but in all considerations, the learning outcomes for children will continue to be our first priority.



To mark World Teachers Day, early childhood teachers took their professional status to the streets of Auckland on 30 October 2010.

From Kay Lloyd Jones of Otago University Childcare Association, Dunedin

After consultation with parents and teachers the committee have reiterated their commitment to maintaining our standards of 'quality' education and care we provide through the employment of well qualified and experienced teachers operating in an environment of better than regulated adult:child ratios.

The parent fees, only 30% of our MOE Income and fees combined, will increase by 25%. This is a huge increase compared with our usual 2-3% in recent years. Also we were offering 20hrs free to all 3 and 4year olds, as originally envisioned by the Labour Government, but will now have an additional charge for food of \$20/week for these families.

Every centre has revised their staffing roster after examining the day in half hour intervals to establish any unnecessary staffing levels. The result is ratios will not be optimal all day but we have preserved the low ratios for the key identified times of the day when, for children, the number of teachers will make a critical difference. In some of our centres we have decided to staff well above legal ratios but will not replace the first teacher who is absent and in this way maintain the team and lessen the use of relievers, therefore improving the continuity of staff for children.

From Nicole Price and Anne Grey of AUT Childcare Centre, Auckland

The first step we took was to hold a lunch-time power-point presentation for parents to explain the overall centre finances, how the government funding is calculated, and how the funding cuts are likely to impact on the overall budget of the centre. This was also explained to the staff at a planning day.

A summary of options were identified and explained. Based on our community values and vision, we decided that the following would be *unacceptable*:

- implementing a staffing policy of replacing staff who leave with unqualified teachers;
- making qualified teachers redundant and replace them with unqualified;
- withdrawing from the 20 hours ECE scheme;
- increasing 'optional charges' for parents on the 20 ECE scheme;
- asking staff to accept lower conditions and hope they don't leave;
- reducing the proportion of qualified staff to only just be above 80%;
- altering the ratio of staff to children;
- reducing Professional Development budget for staff;
- not phoning in relievers;
- combining groups in mixed licenses at quiet periods of the day;
- reduced excursions and trips.

We decided that we would review the fees structure and rates and explore further the concept of quality of care. We used an online tool to survey all the parents, staff and Governance committee on quality indicators. The purpose was twofold:

- to start a conversation about quality and help educate our stakeholders on factors that indicate quality care and education rather than just meeting regulations;
- to gauge from them the aspects of quality that they felt were the most important.

We felt this would give us the evidence for the financial revisions (including fees) that would be the most acceptable.

The five indicators that were considered most important (in order) were:

- the ratio of children to teachers,
- the teaching philosophy and teaching practice,
- the qualifications of teachers,
- the resources in a centre, the policies and procedures;
- the management/governance/administrative support.

Although we all accept that to break even, rises in parent fees and cutting costs are inevitable, this survey gives a basis for making the decision about where the changes will be most acceptable to the staff and the parents.

Short term negative impacts of government policy are already being felt. On a positive note, the teachers agreed to reduce the budget on consumables by significantly reducing their art and craft order. Instead they have set up a recycling programme to obtain 'art materials' from throughout the university. This has dovetailed into the introduction of a project with the children about recycling.

Although the funding will create future difficulties, at this stage, we are determined not to compromise on the aspects that parents, teachers and a management feel lie at the heart of our centre culture. However the funding cuts have provided the impetus for parents and staff to become aware of centre finances, as well as provoking a conversation throughout the centre about what we really value for the care and education of our children.

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Towards knowing ourselves

A review of Āta Kitea te Pae – Scanning the Horizon edited by Beverley Clark and Anne Grey.

Pearson New Zealand (2010).

Cost: \$51.99

Reviewed by Kerry Bethell

Āta Kitea te Pae – Scanning the Horizon is an edited book of chapters, written by scholars from diverse research backgrounds and perspectives but connected in their shared interest and involvement in children's early education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The subtitle: *Perspectives on early childhood education*, reflects the diversity and subjectivities of the contributors, as they 'scan the varied horizons of early childhood teaching and learning' through differing lenses (preface).

The contributors are predominately Auckland based but this book avoids what could have been an 'Auckland' specific viewpoint to present a readily recognisable nationwide view of early childhood education operating today. Woven across the chapters are key sector values and issues: relationship building, bicultural aspirations, infant and toddler curriculum, child centered pedagogy, cultural diversity and critical reflection. Our need to understand today's questions through knowledge of our historical past is addressed in the two chapters on history and philosophy.

The book is aimed at teachers and in particular, student teachers. In their introduction the editors, Anne Grey and Beverley Clark, position teachers as holding multiple learning and teaching roles in their work with children: as pedagogues, as philosophers, as members of a community of practice and as researchers. In the chapters that follow readers are treated as active participants in the process of inquiry based learning. The chapters are very readable; the result of considered formatting, appropriate length, and well illustrated with frequent links to practice. Teachers will find much to spark their curiosity and to explore in the reflective questions, tasks and reading lists that end each chapter.

Contemporary sociocultural theorists argue that teacher development is a social and cultural phenomenon. Development is not something that exists within the teacher but rather takes place when the teacher participates in the activities of the cultural-historical community (Fleer, Hedegaard and Trudge, 2009). There is much in this book that supports this premise such as in a useful chapter by

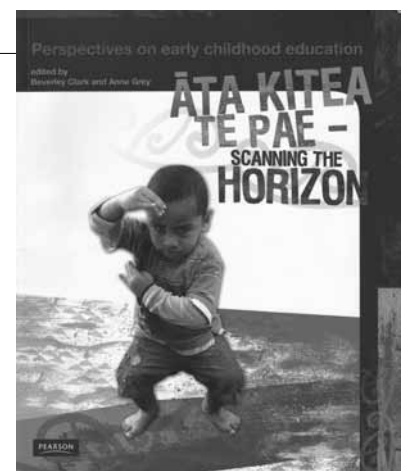
Iris Duhn and Janita Craw. Anne Grey, in a thoughtful chapter, reminds us why an understanding of developmental theory remains important and needs to be positioned alongside sociocultural thinking. Cultural matters are woven throughout the book as well the focus of two chapters by Huhana Forsyth and Gary Leaf and Fa'asaulala Tagoilagi-Leota. There is much for teachers to draw on to enhance their cultural competence.

Overall the chapters bring together a clearly recognisable snapshot of the uniqueness of early education in Aotearoa New Zealand today. What is the book's strength may also be its weakness. Some content current today will inevitably date as new questions and new needs arise and broader political and educational shifts and thinking bring change and new needs to be addressed.

That aside, this book has much to offer teachers, parents and student teachers and should be a ready resource in all teacher education programmes and early childhood settings. To use my historical voice this book makes a valuable contribution to the unending conversation between the past and present in early education. Long may such dialogues continue!

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Children's fascinations

A review of Getting started with schemas: Revealing the wonder-full world of children's play by Nikolien van Wijk

Playcentre Publications, Auckland

Cost: \$49.90

Reviewed by Nicky de Lautour

In the mid 1990s, I remember welcoming the findings of a study conducted by Anne Meade and Pam Cubey (1995), which looked at children's explorations and thinking, related especially to children's mathematical and science-related schemas. So when *Getting started on schemas* arrived a few months ago, I felt an immediate connection to this visually engaging and accessible slim new book and its creative way of presenting the work on schemas. It is Anne Meade who provides the foreword, endorsing both the book and schema theory. She defines schemas as 'repeated patterns in children's play or art' (p.1) linked to a thread of thought, which once recognised can help parents and teachers make more sense of the play they may have previously misunderstood.

This book looks at schemas through a socio-cultural framework with the collaboration and contributions of the parents of Wilton Playcentre. Meade identifies it as a book, 'for parent educators, with parent voices' (p.vii), but I think the audience extends beyond this (as all good Playcentre publications tend to do). I have integrated it in into my teaching sessions with first year early childhood education students, and they have responded well to the personalised stories told from a simple to more complex level. The mysteries and misunderstandings that arise in student observations are de-mystified, for example, when we move towards understanding the difference between 'wandering' and 'wondering' and between 'action schemas' and 'graphic schemas'. The wonderful stories are accompanied by colour pictures and these tell as much about schemas as does the writing; a picture really does tell a thousand words! When explained like this, schema theory has often provoked 'lightbulb moments' amongst students considering their practicum experiences.

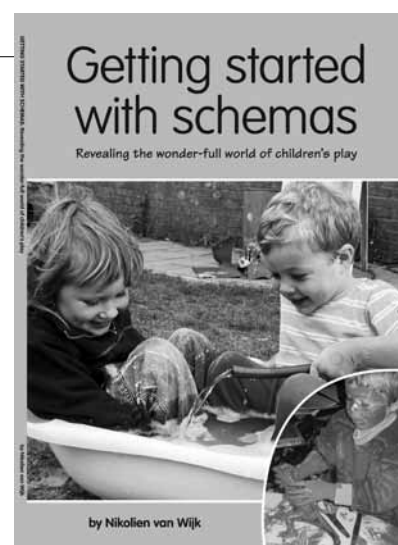
The colour photos are testament to the community spirit and involvement; schemas are put forward as something we can all understand, both educators and parents. They complement the text in rich ways. Van Wijk herself states that she wanted to write a book 'as if we were in a

workshop having a conversation', and this is what makes the book such a welcome and timely contemporary companion to the Competent Children Project (Meade and Cubey, 1995). Van Wijk certainly achieves this and more and the collaborative

nature of the book speaks volumes about the philosophy of Playcentre where parent engagement is a critical component.

There are five chapters which cover defining what a schema is, what to look for, how to spot them, how we work with them once we recognise them, and the links between schemas and Te Whāriki. Weaving the links to Te Whāriki through each chapter may have been a more fitting way to integrate this aspect of schemas but Chapter Four comprehensively explains the connections to the principles and strands. Each chapter is broken up with anecdotal narratives from parents and teachers and the personal tone throughout adds a rich and authentic dimension. There are key points at the end of each chapter which could form the basis of a class discussion with students, a parent's evening or equally a staff meeting at an early childhood centre. Chapter five answers frequently asked questions such as; 'are schemas learnt or are we born with them'? While useful perhaps it would have been more appropriate to include questions for consideration that do not provide all the answers, thus extend the opportunities to engage with the concepts and provide a framework for intended workshops.

Schemas are not new concepts and Piaget used the term to describe particular cognitive structures and concepts that are ways of thinking about or interacting with things in our



environment which are assimilated and organised (cited by Henniger, 2009). Van Wijk only touches on Piaget's contributions in her 'skeletal scholarly history' and to do more than this may exclude the intended audience but alternatively to not include it as a frame of reference may be an unnecessary omission. The intended readers of this book could use the theoretical framework to more clearly understand the significance and importance of Piaget's cognitive development theory and in turn make sense of the processes of learning their children engage in. Yet van Wijk focuses more on the contributions of Athey (1990, 2007) and Nutbrown, (1994, 2006) to introduce the history of schemas linked to knowledge bases. Athey's work has a synergy with van Wijk's book as the result of her work led to a project which focussed on a parent- teacher partnership so it may resonate with the readers more easily. This fits with the current thinking about the ways children learn in a rich socio-cultural context.

Van Wijk states that she has focussed primarily on action schemas (p.5) though acknowledges that Athey gives equal weight to both in her earlier research, and one is left wondering why this is and whether there could be another book to come which may look at graphic schemas more closely as these deserve attention as well.

The work sheets are excellent tools for teachers and parents to access as are the lists of children's literature that link to schemas and may extend play, and the recipes that many parents will appreciate. Set out like a table, the appendix at the back of the book is a useful tool to easily recognise action schemas, along with the curriculum areas and resources that could be involved. However there is danger that these tables may limit possibilities and potential for recognising and responding to schemas which in themselves can be narrow and too specific. If we see our child operating outside this framework, we may feel a sense of unease. Including problems that may be encountered is another irritant in the table and could be re-looked at with any future publication. This deficit model seems un-necessary and rather we could perceive these as opportunities for learning. Instead of 'managing schemas' which van Wijk herself seems uneasy about using, could not

a more fitting concept could have been adapted to explain the intent to provide the appropriate safe, healthy and empowering environment for children to fully explore their emerging new schemas?

However the niggles are minor and this book stands as a celebration of children's diverse and dynamic learning styles. It has added a new depth and insight to my first year students' understandings that was refreshing and meaningful. I too find myself returning to this book when planning classes so the target audience is extended beyond what van Wijk herself anticipated. I feel it could be a vital addition to the portfolio of anyone who is involved in early childhood education.

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A blessing for the second generation

Every day I see the beautiful
serene faces of my colleagues
from Sri Lanka, India, Burma,
Korea and China.

They bring to us their culture,
food, we can understand.
Languages with strange sounds
words we can't read.

They seem so confident
so sure of their place
models of motherhood
but how will it be in the future

Will their foreheads crease
over lost religion?
Will their eyes squint
suspecting their children
lie to bridge the generation gap?

Will tears cut their cheeks for
children
who decide not to have babies?
Will fear of the retirement home
make them sharp-tongued?

May love and understanding
reduce the disappointments
for these mothers who give up
everything for the second
generation.

Maryrose Doull

Contributors

Kerry Bethell is a senior lecturer and the programme coordinator of the Bachelor of Education (Teaching) Early Years at Massey University College of Education. She teaches in papers concerned with assessment, curriculum development, history and philosophical developments. Her research focus is around exploring the historical processes by which ideas about early education of children were developed, disseminated and recast into practice and the agency of teachers and educational leaders as pedagogical and reform agents 1870 – 1950.

Ken Blaiklock is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education at the Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. His research and teaching interests focus on assessment, and the development of children's language and literacy skills. Email: kblaiklock@unitec.ac.nz

Nicky de Lautour is a lecturer at the School of Education Te Kura Mātauranga, Auckland University of Technology in the early childhood programmes. She has just completed her Masters in Educational Leadership and has a special interest in the area of curriculum in ECE particularly the Arts and teacher's leadership roles within this context. Nicky will continue on with collaborative research in this area in 2011. She is excited about encouraging students to recognise schema development in children's learning in early childhood communities in new and dynamic ways.

Maryrose Doull lives in Auckland. She has published a poem in *Early Education*. She recently came second in New Zealand Poetry Society International Competition. While no longer working in a childcare centre, she continues to have a keen interest in early childhood education.

Alex Gunn works at the University of Canterbury in the School of Educational Studies and Human Development. She is a steward for the forthcoming early childhood convention and chairs the academic planning committee for that event. Formerly a teacher in childcare, Alex now researches, writes, and teaches into various aspects of early childhood education and care.

Amanda Fourie: I have an M.Ed. and Early Intervention Diploma. I have been teaching young children and adults for many years. It is very rewarding to see any person reach a goal with or without support over time with persistent attempts to succeed. For me to be able to play a little role in the achievement of such a successful outcome is always a privilege.

Sue Stover is a senior lecturer in Early Childhood Education at AUT University and co-edits *Early Education* with Claire McLachlan.



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