

Blaiklock, K. (2010). The assessment of children's language in early childhood centres. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 45, 105-110.

Correspondence:

Ken Blaiklock, School of Education, Unitec, PB 92025, Auckland, New Zealand.

Email: [kblaiklock@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:kblaiklock@unitec.ac.nz)

The development of language skills is a fundamental area of learning for children in the early childhood years. During the first five years of life, children acquire much of what they need to know in order to become confident and capable communicators in their first, and possibly their second, language. Young children show dramatic gains in their articulation skills, their command of spoken grammar, and their understanding of an ever-expanding vocabulary. The successful development of language is crucial for facilitating other areas of cognitive development and for providing a foundation for children's literacy skills. Language development is also critical for social interaction and the formation of social relationships (see Otto, 2006; Pence & Justice, 2008).

Given the fundamental importance of language development, it would be reasonable to expect that teachers be provided with clear guidance on how to assess children's language in the early childhood years. In New Zealand, however, this is not the case.

The Ministry of Education provides information on the assessment of young children in a resource called *Kei Tua o te Pae: Early Childhood Exemplars*. The resource consists of 20 booklets containing examples of assessment from a variety of early childhood centres. The booklets do not focus on particular domains of learning and development (e.g. physical, cognitive, and social learning) but are organised around particular themes such as "sociocultural assessment", "competence", "continuity", and the five strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), the early childhood curriculum (Belonging, Well-Being, Exploration, Communication, Contribution). Language development is a focus of Book 14: Communication/Mana Reo (Ministry of Education, 2007a).

Book 1, *An Introduction to Kei Tua o te Pae* states: "the focus throughout *Kei Tua o te Pae* is on assessment as a powerful force for learning, not on a particular format or method for assessment" (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.2). In reality,

however, *Kei Tua o te Pae* focuses almost exclusively on one approach to assessment, namely Learning Stories. Teachers produce Learning Stories by observing children and writing narrative accounts of the learning that is said to be occurring within a particular context (see Carr, 1998; 2001). Nowhere within the 540 pages that make up the booklets of *Kei Tua o te Pae* are there examples of internationally recognised assessment methods such as running records, time sampling, event sampling, diary records, criterion referenced measures, and checklists (see Brassard & Boehm, 2007; Martin, 2007).

There appear to be many problems in using Learning Stories, as exemplified in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, as a means of assessing children's language. One important concern is that although the Learning Stories in *Kei Tua o te Pae* often include "transcripts" of a child's language, the examples of language may be what a teacher recalls a child said rather than being the actual words used by the child. *Kei Tua o te Pae* makes no mention of the importance of accurately recording a child's language. Indeed, advocates of Learning Stories (e.g. Hatherly & Sands, 2002) have stressed the importance of the teacher's interpretation when recording an event rather than emphasising the need for objectivity.

Hence it is quite possible that the examples of a child's language that appear within quotation marks in a Learning Story are not actually what the child said. When teachers write Learning Stories they may refer to notes or digital photos to remind them of what occurred but they will rarely have an accurate recording of a child's language. An indication of the lack of accuracy in the presentation of children's language is that the Learning Stories in *Kei Tua o te Pae* seldom show the mispronunciations, repetitions, and grammatical errors that would be expected in an accurate transcript of a young child's language.

The lack of a requirement to include authentic language samples reduces the value of Learning Stories for the assessment of children's language. Another problem with the Learning Stories approach is that nowhere in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, nor in other publications on Learning Stories (e.g., Carr, 1998, 2001), are teachers provided with guidance on where, when, and how often to assess language. As a result, it is possible for early childhood centres to overlook making any assessments of children's language development.

Let's say, however, that a teacher decides to focus on language development using a Learning Stories approach. And further, let's imagine that in spite of the lack

of guidelines on objective recording in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, the teacher makes careful observations and accurate records of a child's language. In this case, what ideas and guidance does *Kei Tua o te Pae* provide on the assessment and analysis of language?

Of the 20 *Kei Tua o te Pae* booklets, oral language development is discussed most directly in the booklet titled *Communication/Mana Reo* (Book 14, Ministry of Education, 2007a). This booklet examines communication in relation to the 4 goals of this domain that are outlined in *Te Whāriki*: (1) Non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes, (2) Verbal communication skills for a range of purposes, (3) Stories and symbols of their own and other cultures, and (4) Different ways to be creative and expressive.

The second goal, "Verbal communication skills for a range of purposes" is the area of most relevance to language development. This section of the *Communication/Mana Reo* booklet begins with the following statement:

"Assessments value the interactions between adults and children and with peers. They are *specific about those aspects of verbal communication* [italics added] that the children are developing" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.4). However, an examination of the exemplars that are provided to illustrate the use of Learning Stories to assess language show they are *anything but specific* about children's language development. The first exemplar that focuses on verbal communication is titled "Starting With Photos" and describes how a boy called Connor talks about his father's work by referring to some photos he has brought from home (Ministry of Education, 2007a, pp. 10-12). The Learning Story includes photos of Connor at the centre alongside what are presented as direct quotes of what he is saying at particular times. It is unclear, however, whether the statements are authentic quotes, or whether they are intended to simply represent the substance of what Connor was saying. Unless the teacher was using a voice recorder, it is unlikely that the language could have been accurately recorded in the in the way it is presented.

At the end of the Learning Story, the teacher's summary of the child's learning is presented. Although this is meant to be an exemplar that illustrates the assessment of verbal communication, there is very little analysis of language. Instead there are a number of very general comments, beginning with the statement: "Connor's work has shown over a period of time that he has many learning dispositions, skills, and attitudes, too, which make him a competent and confident learner" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.11). Following this statement there are some additional

comments related to Connor's language: "He asks adults and other children to help", "He is able to direct others to get an outcome", and "He can express his ideas and feelings verbally" (p.11). These general comments provide no real analysis of Connor's language and would apply to nearly all young children, whether they have early or more advanced language skills. Nor is there any real analysis of language in the written information that follows the Learning Story where the authors of *Kei Tua o te Pae* comment on "what does this assessment tell us about the learning" (p.12). The authors describe how Connor can use photos as a starting point for conversations but they provide no analysis of Connor's language apart from saying that he uses "complex verbal explanations" (p.12).

There is also little analysis of language development in the other Learning Stories that are included in Book 14 as examples of the assessment of verbal communication. The exemplars provide general descriptions of centre experiences where teachers respond to children's interests in ways that provide for communication. The featured Learning Stories depict children involved in a range of activities but no references are made, in either the teacher analyses of the Learning Stories, nor in the supplementary comments by the authors of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, to any research or publications on language development.

If, as I have argued, Learning Stores are inadequate for assessing children's language, can they be justified in terms of their value for planning experiences to enhance children's language learning? A major emphasis of *Kei Tua o te Pae* is that assessments should be formative, that is they should facilitate children's future learning (see the discussion of this issue in Book 1, Ministry of Education, 2004; and Book 10, Ministry of Education, 2007b). An examination of the "verbal communication" exemplars, however, raises questions about the value of this type of assessment for fostering language learning. The ideas on how to foster children's learning (as recorded by teachers in the "What next" section of each Learning Story) tend to be the sorts of things that a teacher would be doing anyway in her or his daily interactions with a child. The suggestions could be summarised as 'build on children's interests and encourage children to communicate with others'. Teachers do not need to produce Learning Stories in order to come up with such recommendations. Furthermore, the time delay (which may span over a period of weeks) between observing a child, producing a Learning Story, and acting on the recommendations may reduce the effectiveness of particular ideas. Teachers need to respond to children

'in the moment'. It certainly may be useful for teachers to record ideas on how to further a particular child's learning (and follow-up on these ideas later that day or the next day) but these ideas can simply be jotted down in a notebook without the necessity of writing a Learning Story. Teachers are aware that the best way to foster language learning is to be involved in responsive interactions with children (see Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2006). The irony is that time spent writing Learning Stories is time not available for interacting with children.

Language development occurs over time. One of the joys of working with young children is seeing their progress as they develop particular vocal sounds, learn first words, and then go on to combine words in ever increasingly complex ways. *Kei Tua o te Pae*, however, provides teachers with no information about the progressive development of language skills. There are no exemplars that provide analysis of changes in an individual child's language over time. There is no acknowledgement that children's language typically shows age-related developmental patterns. Indeed, rather than acknowledging that age may be a factor in language development, *Kei Tua o te Pae* seems to exclude this possibility by never mentioning a child's age in the verbal communication exemplars.

Although there is considerable variation in language development between children, an awareness of age-related changes is important when assessing language. The real danger in not being aware of developmental patterns is that children with significant language delay may not be identified and may therefore miss out on the provision of effective early intervention.

*Kei Tua o te Pae* claims to be a formative assessment that provides "assessment for learning". I have argued in this paper, however, that *Kei Tua o te Pae* provides teachers with little information that assists them with either the assessment or enhancement of language learning. The fundamental importance of language development for young children means that there is now an urgent need to give attention to implementing more effective ways of assessing language in New Zealand early childhood centres.

Whether an assessment is effective or not is linked to the underlying principles that have been used to develop an assessment. The main criteria used to develop the assessments in *Kei Tua o te Pae* are adapted from *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and are set out as questions in Book 10 (Ministry of Education, 2007b, 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 whanau?

Are the assessments embedded in reciprocal and responsive relationships?

The above criteria are valuable considerations for any assessment of young children. It is what is missing from the criteria that is of concern. No mention is made in *Kei Tua o te Pae* or *Te Whāriki* of two factors that are usually a priority when evaluating the worth of assessments. These factors are (1) validity (does the assessment actually measure what it claims to measure) and (2) reliability (does the assessment provide a consistent measure and would different observers reach a similar judgement if using the measure for a particular child). The importance of validity and reliability is emphasised in many publications on the assessment of young children (e.g., Bagnato, 2007; Brassard & Boehm, 2007; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003; Epstein, Schweinhart, DeBruin-Parecki, & Robin, 2004).

The lack of attention to validity and reliability means that it is difficult to have confidence in the approach to language assessment that is promoted in *Kei Tua o te Pae*. Before endorsing such an approach, the Ministry of Education should have checked that it was supported by research studies. Currently, however, there is a dearth of evidence that the techniques promoted in *Kei Tua o te Pae* (including Learning Stories) are a credible means of assessing children's language.

The Ministry of Education needs to re-examine the guidance it is providing to teachers on the assessment of young children's language. There is much international research on the assessment of language but this research knowledge has not been utilised in *Kei Tua o te Pae*. Numerous studies have shown that assessment needs to take account of the interacting components of children's language, namely *form* (phonology and syntax), *content* (semantics) and *use* in different contexts (pragmatics). A distinction needs to also be made between children's spoken language (*expressive*) and the language they comprehend (*receptive*) (see Brassard & Boehm, 2007; Enz & Morrow, 2009).

Assessment of language is a complex task but a number of measures have been developed for use within early childhood settings. The Ministry of Education could gain much from an examination of international experience on methods of language assessment (e.g., California Department of Education, 2007; Otto, 2006; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2008). The importance of language development is such that the Ministry should set the highest standards in ensuring that the techniques used to assess language are credible and will have demonstrated benefits for children.

### References

- Bagnato, S. J. (2007). *Authentic assessment for early childhood intervention: Best practices*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Brassard, M. R., & Boehm, A. E. (2007). *Preschool assessment: Principles and practices*. New York: Guilford Press.
- California Department of Education. (2007). *Desired results developmental profile - revised*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.
- Carr, M. (1998). *Assessing children's learning in early childhood settings: A professional development programme for discussion and reflection*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Enz, B. J., & Morrow, L. M. (2009). *Assessing preschool literacy development*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Epstein, A. S., Schweinhart, L. J., DeBruin-Parecki, A., & Robin, K. B. (2004). *Preschool assessment: A guide to developing a balanced approach*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- Girolametto, L., Weitzman, E., & Greenberg, J. (2006). Facilitating language skills: In-service education for early childhood educators and preschool teachers. *Infants and Young Children, 19*, 36-48.

- Hatherly, A., & Sands, L. (2002). So what is different about Learning Stories? *The First Years: Nga Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 4(1), 8-12.
- Martin, S. (2007). *Take a look: Observation and portfolio assessment in early childhood* (4th ed.). Toronto: Pearson.
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2004). *An introduction to Kei tua o te pae (Book 1). Kei tua o te pae: Assessment for learning. Early childhood exemplars*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2007a). *The strands of Te Whāriki: Communication/Mana reo (Book 14). Kei tua o te pae: Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2007b). *An introduction to Books 11-15 (Book 10). Kei tua o te pae: Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2003). *Position statement: Early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation*. Washington DC: NAEYC.
- Otto, B. (2006). *Language development in early childhood* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Pence, K. L., & Justice, L. M. (2007). *Language development from theory to practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (2008). *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Handbook*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.