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Re visioning assessment as a collaborative venture

A study of the assessment practices used with young children in kindergartens and prep grades in Victoria was conducted which included an examination of the roles of teachers, children and parents within the assessment practices. The aim was to determine levels of participation, contribution and empowerment throughout the processes and to understand which forms of collaboration lead to positive outcomes for all interested parties.

Collaborations have been described by Kagan and Rivera (1991) as "those efforts that unite and empower individuals and organisations to accomplish collectively what they could not accomplish independently" (p.52).

Research and literature supports the many benefits of collaboration (Willis, 1980; Bastiani, 1993; Hegarty, 1993; Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996). Collaboration within the assessment process is encouraged as a means of empowering parents (Pugh, 1985; Favretto, 1998), as a means of empowering children (Hill & Hill, 1990; Puckett & Black, 1994; Stone, 1995; Smith, 1996b; Tinworth, 1997), and of linking the home experience with the kindergarten or school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Halliwell, 1993; Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott & Poskitt, 1993; Fox, Hanline, Vail & Galant, 1994). Collaboration can also lead to the provision of a curriculum that is culturally and individually relevant by involving the community (Gestwicki, 1992; Katz, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1994; Apple & Beane, 1995; Burns, 1995; Ritchie, 1996). It can also lead to shared decision making and the promotion of social justice and equity (Bloom, 1995; Apple & Beane, 1995; Wolk, 1998; Badger & Wilkinson, 1998) and can improve the continuity between kindergarten and prep grade (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 1992).

1. Assessment practices.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an increased awareness of the important role that other people play in supporting learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Lidz, 1991; Fler, 1992; Davies, Cameron, Politano & Gregory, 1994; Puckett & Black, 1994; Nutbrown, 1996; Favretto, 1998). Therefore, this needed to be given consideration and be reflected in the assessment practices. Educators have been encouraged to understand and consider the importance of this 'social nature of learning' (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasised the importance of the social origins of language and thinking and he criticised the unidirectional approach to understanding child-environment relations and highlighted the importance of the reciprocal nature of relationships (Berk & Winsler, 1995). In response, assessment of what children could do with support as well as what they could do independently became important to educators. Vygotsky (in Berk & Winsler, 1995) discusses the active role of adults in maximising children's learning by actively leading them along the learning pathway. The importance of guided participation, or scaffolding, as forms of collaboration that lead to internalised mental processes has also been recognised (Bruner, 1983; Berk & Winsler, 1995).

The changes to how assessment was carried out went hand in hand with changes to educational thinking. Cooperative learning became recognised as an important learning process and started to be used in schools (Hill & Hill, 1990). This led to assessment being carried out in groups, as well as with individuals. Assessment started to reflect this understanding of the role that peers played and the impact of the interactions on understandings.

At this time, social constructivists demonstrated the importance of including culture and social understandings into their approaches. Prior to this, children had been expected to learn the same thing at the same time and therefore assessment was the same for all children. There were moves towards a critical perspective, which supports children to become conscious of their own perceptions of reality and to deal with them critically (Hill, 1997). In the critical perspective, Freire (1972) introduced the notion that every human being is capable of looking critically at their own world in dialogue with others (Benn, 1981). This perspective resulted in an increased awareness and questioning of the power base that influences educational knowledge and how it is acquired.

Alternative assessments, that originated in the classroom, required children to construct their own knowledge rather than choosing responses that would measure what they could do and what they knew (Johnson & Rose, 1997). These assessment practices fitted with the rationalists view of children as goal seeking, thinking individuals who construct their own knowledge. Learning was thus internal and individual (Seefeldt, 1990). The range of alternative assessment processes emphasised different aspects of collaboration and provided active roles for teachers, parents, children and the community. They also stressed the importance of the context of assessment being relevant and meaningful to children and their families.

The term 'ecological assessment', introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1979), and used by Bradley and Howe (1980), and Ballard (1990), highlights the importance of gathering information on children that reflects the wider influences of the environments in which the child interacts.

The term 'authentic assessment' (Shepard, 1989; Wiggins 1990; Puckett & Black, 1994) was used to describe assessment that was based on real tasks. The authentic assessment processes merged learning, teaching and assessment in a unique way and changed assessment from being thought of as a separate process. Projects, portfolios and records of actual performances of children were seen as a means of keeping assessment authentic and within the real contexts of learning (Ayers, 1994).

'Self Assessment' became an important part of authentic assessment. It reflected a view of children as active in their own learning and encouraged them to engage in reflection and goal setting (Puckett & Black, 1994). Profiling children's self-knowledge can provide a clear picture of how children see themselves because self-concept was seen as an integration of the child's personal and social identity in relation to activities and experiences (Bornholt, 1997).

'Dynamic assessment' was the term used to emphasise the importance of the process of learning and the engagement of the teacher in the process (Lidz, 1991; Hills, 1992; Berk & Winsler, 1995). Berk and Winsler (1995) described 'dynamic assessment' as focusing on the teacher's discovery of how to facilitate the child's learning rather than on the child demonstrating their ability to the teacher.

The terms 'responsive curriculum' (Cambourne & Turbill, 1994) and 'responsive teaching' (Jones & Warren, 1991; McWilliam & Bailey, 1992; Fox, Hanline, Vail & Galant, 1994)

complemented the work of dynamic assessment by promoting child engagement, and elaborating on the child's ideas.

Another alternative and collaborative assessment process that was introduced at this time came in the form of portfolios. The term 'portfolio assessment' (Wolf, 1989; Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991; Johnson & Rose 1997; Elliott, 1999) has been described as the process of gathering and sharing assessment information between a range of interested parties. Important features of portfolios include student participation in selecting content, self-evaluation and goal setting based on an examination of achievement, effort and improvement (Johnson & Rose, 1997). Portfolios were found to be more equitable than standardised tests and they focused instruction on higher order thinking skills, they also provided useful information to teachers about children's thought processes and emphasised real world skills and problem solving (Supovitz & Brennan, 1997).

'Respectful assessment' takes into account a range of factors and achievements and values the participation of the person being assessed as well as the perspectives of those carrying out the assessment (Nutbrown, 1996).

The changes in assessment were summed up at this time by Daly (1989) who stated:

The notion of assessment has finally changed from that of measurement of skills to the gathering of layers of information which, together, provide rich and rigorous data about children's development. This data will establish not only where children are 'at' but also will assist in their future learning (p.19).

Goffin (1996) criticises the early childhood field for adopting a child development framework that does not adequately address cultural diversity and cultural politics by questioning whose knowledge and what knowledge should inform practice. MacNaughton (1999), also challenges the use of child development knowledge because it has been silent about equity, social justice, racism, sexism, gender and equity and ignores the social and cultural lenses that are essential to understanding development and learning. Written observations that focus exclusively on individual children or that divide children into developmental areas are likely to decontextualise and misrepresent learning (Nyland, 1999; Alcock, 2000). Therefore, the social setting of the child as well the perspectives of the assessor requires consideration (Nutbrown, 1996).

2. The role of the teacher.

The new role of the teacher in the alternative assessment processes required teachers to collaborate with children and scaffold their efforts to master new skills. The importance of working within the child's zone of proximal development or their 'buds' of development, rather than only examining their final 'fruits of development' was recognised (Vygotsky, in Berk & Winsler, 1995). The purpose of assessment should therefore be "to identify the threshold of performance and knowledge in the development of the individual rather than to provide a list of isolated achievements and deficits" (Griffin, 1997, p.4).

3. Background to the study.

The research data for this study was collected in 1997. At this time in Victoria, the Preschool Quality Assessment Checklist (PQAC) (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 1996) had been introduced into kindergartens and the Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF) (Board of Studies, 1995) had been introduced into primary schools. It was therefore timely to examine whether these newly introduced documents had impacted on the nature of the assessment practices.

The Preschool Quality Assessment Checklist (PQAC) was introduced into Victorian kindergartens to improve the quality of the preschool service offered to young children and their families. This document put forward several new challenges to teachers regarding collaboration with other parties, particularly with parents. Conversations with children were highlighted as important. Kindergarten teachers were also encouraged to incorporate the skills and information provided by members of the community into the program.

At the same time that the PQAC was introduced into kindergartens the Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF) was introduced into primary schools. The CSF is primarily a tool for ensuring that all the areas of the curriculum and planned learning outcomes are attended to and that, in the pursuit of integrated learning, some elements are not omitted (Board of Studies, 1995). The introduction of learning outcomes resulted in a shift in emphasis from attempting to assess what is taught to attempting to assess what is learned.

Given the fact that the learning outcomes within the CSF were being criticised for the lack of collaboration in determining appropriate outcomes for children, this aspect of assessment warranted investigation. Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1995) stated that the outcomes determined by experts from a distance, about what children should know and be able to do, may not, on a daily basis, take into consideration what children find intellectually interesting, meaningful and motivating and through which they gain a great deal of specific knowledge and skill.

Scarino, Vale, McKay and Clark (1994) stressed the need for learning outcomes to be relevant to the learners, parents, school and community rather than extending knowledge for knowledge's sake. The importance of assessment strategies reflecting professional knowledge about what is in the best interests of children was also highlighted because prescribed outcomes, disempower teachers and are not linked to specific conditions, contexts and processes (Turner, 1994; Welsh, 1999).

4. Results of the study

4.1. Methods of assessment used in kindergartens and prep grades.

Thirty kindergarten teachers and thirty prep grade teachers participated in the study. Teachers' perceptions of their methods of assessment were investigated. The assessment methods were examined according to those that the teacher carried out alone and those that were collaborative.

Table 1. Methods of assessment carried out by the teacher.

Methods of assessment kindergarten prep grade

(n=30) (n=30)

observations 26 28

tests 2 23

work samples 6 22

anecdotal records 7 21

checklist 25 17
learning outcomes 1 7
running records 2 7
observation survey 0 6
individual files 0 5
assigned specific tasks 0 5
oral testing/questioning 0 4

Table 2. Collaborative assessment methods.

Method of assessment kindergarten prep grade
(n=30) (n=30)
interviews with children 0 10
parental discussions 16 5
student self assessment 0 4
discussion with staff 4 3
specialist reports 7 3
recording interview 2 0
home visits 3 0

All teachers used a combination of approaches when assessing children. The methods used in kindergartens were predominantly observations (26), checklists (25) and parental discussion (16). In prep grades observations (28), tests (23) and work samples (22) and anecdotal records (21) were the most commonly used methods of assessment, followed by checklists (17). Collaboration was reflected in the responses of half the kindergarten teachers who included parent discussion as one method of assessment. Three kindergarten teachers listed home visits as a method of assessment, which also recognises the importance of home/ family relations. Two kindergarten teachers listed 'recording interview information' as part of their assessment demonstrating that they value the input of parents during these interviews. In the extract from an interview, with a kindergarten teacher, the

teacher (K 16) showed that she valued parental input and was interested in gathering background information on each child. She commented that information was gathered both on enrolment, and then followed up with a home visit. The kindergarten teacher also provided an example of including children in the assessment process by asking children what they would like to learn. This kindergarten teacher had also started to empower children by allowing them to put together a folder of their work. She also asked them to reflect on their interests and learning, and then used their ideas in the program. The teacher was surprised at the ability of children to respond to her questions showing that teachers in early childhood still do not view children as rich and resourceful and strong (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1994).

Overall the empowerment of children was quite limited in the assessment processes. Some prep grade teachers included children in self assessment (4), and others held interviews with children (10). The self assessment example in the prep grade teacher interview transcript appeared quite formal where two or three times a year the children wrote down what they had learnt and how they were going. In an interview with a prep grade teacher (S 6), she discussed the time consuming nature of the new assessment techniques and the fact that the whole school was looking at the issue of freeing up teachers to 'do assessment' with individuals. This raises concerns that these teachers may be returning to a view of assessment as a separate exercise, which would remove it from the context of teaching and learning.

Collaboration between teachers, parents and children.

Teachers' perceptions on the role of teachers, parents and children in the assessment process were outlined to provide an understanding of the sharing of responsibilities within the assessment processes, and to determine the level and forms of collaboration.

4.2 Teachers outlined their perceptions of their own roles within the assessment process.

Table 3. Teachers' perceptions of their role in the assessment process.

Teachers role in kindergartens in prep grades

(n=30) (n=30)

assess 'where children are at' developmentally 17 0

observe and record development 0 16

pick up concerns/referrals 8 0

communicate with parents 7 17

facilitate, extend development 4 11

identify strengths and weaknesses 3 0

make sure children are ready for school 3 0

lead/instigate the process 2 0

give information to students 0 6

report to other teachers/professionals 0 5

Just over half the kindergarten teachers saw their own role as assessing 'where children were at' developmentally. One quarter of kindergarten teachers also saw their role as picking up concerns and just under one quarter saw their role as communicating with parents.

Over half the prep grade teachers saw their role as communicating with parents, and approximately half saw their role as observing and recording development. An active role of extending and facilitating development was outlined by approximately one third of prep grade teachers and only one tenth of kindergarten teachers. Two prep grade teachers particularly mentioned taking a positive focus to guide and enhance learning. The assessment literature highlights the importance of the teacher taking an active role (Lidz, 1991; Berk & Winsler, 1996). Six prep grade teachers saw one of their roles as giving information to children. These results confirm Elliott's study (1999b) which also found that some teachers still see this as their role.

4.3. Information shared between kindergarten teachers and prep grade teachers.

There was very little information sharing about children between kindergarten teachers and prep grade teachers. There were transition programs set up to familiarise children with the school system and ease their adjustment to school. However, there was little sharing of information about the children themselves. This usually only occurred if a child was perceived as having a potential problem or concern. Little attention was given to the learning that has occurred for children prior to them commencing prep grade. When children moved from kindergarten to school prep grade teachers did not build upon what had gone before, but rather they started to establish assessment information anew. If transition programs are going to support continuity for children in their learning, there will need to be far more information sharing about all children within these programs. Familiarisation with new environments for young children is acknowledged as being very important but teachers also need to take more seriously the importance of building on what has gone before.

4.4 Teachers described how they involved parents in the assessment process.

Table 4. Teachers' perceptions of parent involvement in the assessment process.

Type of involvement in kindergarten in prep grade

by parents (n=30) (n=30)

no involvement 8 11

sometimes, if needed 4 0

discussions or informal chats 15 8

interviews 4 8

provide background information 11 8

provide written comments 0 3

parents of children with special needs 0 2

school council parents 0 2

individual learning plans 1 2

gathering data 2 0

Approximately one third of teachers did not involve parents at all in the assessment process or provide a role for them in the assessment process. One third of teachers are not taking the opportunity to provide parents with a valuable role in assessment, despite the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council Inc. (1996a) outlining that assessment is one area where a partnership around learning can take place.

Half the kindergarten teachers involved parents through discussions and informal chats. Just over one third of kindergarten teachers involved parents in providing background information, and slightly less prep grade teachers involved parents by providing information. Just under one third of prep grade teachers involved parents in collaborating and sharing information. Six kindergarten teachers set goals with parents. Six kindergarten teachers and six prep grade teachers involved parents when they needed to discuss concerns. There were some positive examples of individuals valuing parents and collaborating with them in decision making. Apple and Beane (1995) argue that children achieve at a higher level if this occurs.

While some teachers clearly valued the input of parents and shared the role of assessment with them, other teachers viewed parents as those to be 'educated', or those to receive information. Some teachers saw parents as giving information. The literature discusses this level of understanding, where teachers view the parent role as supporting the teacher in their work, by giving information rather than understanding the reciprocal nature of the relationship where the teachers can also support the child's home life (Willis, 1980).

4.5. Teachers outlined the involvement of children within the assessment process.

Table 5. Teachers' perceptions of children's involvement in the assessment process.

Type of involvement in kindergarten in prep grade
of children (n=30) (n=30)

no involvement 26 11

discussion and conferencing 2 11

setting own goals/challenges 1 2

self assessment on report 0 2

subject self evaluation sheets 1 2

Children were given very limited roles in their own assessment in kindergartens with only four kindergarten teachers providing an active role for children in the assessment process. Just over half the prep grade teachers provided an active role for children with approximately one third of teachers involving children in discussions and conferencing.

Self assessment was more common in prep grades than in kindergartens. However, it was still quite limited. Examples given of children responding to work with smiley faces to indicate how they found the work indicates an early stage of encouraging children to reflect on their own learning rather than showing a confidence in children's abilities to evaluate and help plan their next teaching and learning steps.

Children are always involved in assessment by their very presence. However, they are not always seen as contributors to the process by being given a more active role. Teachers need to believe that children have a valuable contribution to make in the assessment process for them to be given an identifiable role. Teachers in kindergartens and schools do not yet view children as rich and resourceful and strong (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1994). Children 'need to be reconceptualised as actors in their own right, as contributors, moral interpreters of the world, participants in shared decisions, and people who participate in labour at home and elsewhere' (Smith, 1996b, p.6). Puckett and Black (2000) view children as planners and choice makers who, with guidance and support can carry out self assessment and set personal goals for learning. Hill and Hill (1990) also value the contribution that the child can make to assessment : "Learners know best about what they have learned and how they did it. This leads gradually to students setting their own goals for future learning" (p.101). By providing an active role for children in the assessment process it shifts the emphasis from the teacher as the central figure in the process which has benefits for teachers and children, (Stone, 1995). Other benefits of collaboration are that children can have an open, honest relationship with teachers and parents (Bastiani, 1993) and the child's self concept can provide a picture of how children see themselves, that can be useful in planning future learning experiences (Bornholt, 1997).

4.6. Reporting within the assessment process.

Verbal reporting.

Kindergarten teachers favored informal discussions as their form of verbal reporting, whereas, all prep grade teachers used interviews as a means of communicating about assessment. The major reasons for holding interviews in kindergartens was to discuss concerns. Beaty (1994) reported that kindergarten teachers focus on what is wrong with children and these results confirm kindergarten teachers focused on concerns rather than taking a strength focus or reporting progress. One kindergarten teacher took a strength focus and 'discussed the positives'. The literature supports the benefits of focusing on children's strengths and building on these (Bastiani, 1993; Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996). Prep grade teachers used interviews to report on progress and frequently gave information to parents.

In this study, despite the frequency of informal discussions in kindergartens, parents reported that they did not receive all the information they required. While there was considerable informal communication possibly the findings of the Auditor General are reinforced in these findings as parents reported needing more focused information about their children. Nutbrown (1996) reported that informed dialogue was the way to achieve true partnership:

Time must be made for ongoing, co-operative and informed dialogue between parents and educators in home and group settings if children's efforts are to be noticed and understood. This makes for a partnership of the highest order and it is an all important factor in supporting, extending and challenging children as they learn...(p.47).

To be effective the communication between parents and teachers needs to be ongoing and informed so both parties can contribute in the process. Without information parents are not able to contribute effectively.

Written reports.

Approximately two thirds of kindergarten teachers did not provide a written report of any form. Only three kindergarten teachers actually provided individual written reports to parents. Written reports were used universally in prep grades as a means of reporting to parents. Prep grade teachers gave several reasons for providing reports such as providing information to parents on progress, showing achievements, strengths and weaknesses.

Developmental domains were a clear focus in the limited number of written reports given by kindergarten teachers. Prep grade teachers had a clear subject focus using the Key Learning Areas (KLAs). Some prep grade teachers added one domain of development or a personal comment. These results show that as Elliott (1999) warned, teachers are focusing on academic skills and ignoring other important dispositions and life skills. Continuity for parents as well as for children becomes an issue when the focus of teachers in the two different sectors of education take such a different focus in their assessment.

Six kindergarten teachers provided the opportunity for input from parents on the report, either written (4) or at interview (2). Eight prep grade teachers provided the opportunity for parents to provide a written (6) or verbal response (2). Over two thirds of prep grade teachers did not provide the opportunity for parental input on the reports. Some teachers are valuing the contribution that parents can bring to their child's assessment related to reports, although this is still only being done so by a small proportion of teachers.

There was a greater level of satisfaction with the amount of information received by prep grade parents when compared with kindergarten parents. Over one third of kindergarten parents did not receive all the assessment information that they wanted, whereas less than one tenth of prep grade parents did not receive all the information that they wanted.

The results of this current study found that most parents wanted to be involved in the assessment process. A very small number of parents in the study did not want to be involved at all in the assessment process. A few parents said that assessment should be left to the teacher because they are the experts. The majority of both kindergarten parents and prep parents listed a range of possible roles for themselves. Parents listed several aspects of how they could contribute to the assessment process. Despite the large number of parents who wanted to be involved in the assessment process only a few parents wrote of the possibility of being involved in real decision making for their child.

5. Implications for the role of the parent in the assessment process.

When discussing the various levels of involvement available to parents, Pugh (1985) identified collaboration as the highest level where parents are able to contribute to the assessment of their children's needs, and participate in the planning of a suitable program for their child. The involvement of a parent was found to have a lasting effect on the parent's feeling of investment in and attachment to their child (Pugh & De'Ath, 1984; a'Beckett, 1988). Assessment is one process where parents can be active collaborators and make a valuable contribution because they see and interact with their children in many situations, and have a great deal of knowledge about them (Horowitz, 1995; Raban, 1998). Teachers will gain greater insights into the child and they will appreciate the child more fully by collaborating with parents (Stonehouse, 1988; Hegarty, 1993; Newman, 1995). Bastiani (1993) stresses the complementary nature of parent and teacher roles.

Favretto (1998) suggests one step towards helping parents toward empowerment would be to have parents and teachers develop common principles together. This would begin a process of cooperative partnership where they are involved as decision makers for their children. When teachers take a collaborative perspective it turns parents into partners and the teachers work load can be reduced. Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott and Poskitt (1993) suggest that the partnership between home and school should seek to encourage a shared commitment to the success of the individual child and create an ethos of understanding and openness in home-school relations.

Educators are starting to recognise the benefits of taking a strength focus approach (Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996) to assessment rather than using a deficit approach. An approach that makes the assumption that all children have capabilities that can be built on, rather than having problems to correct. When the assessment uses a 'strength-focus' approach, rather than focusing on areas needing improvement, it provides opportunities for assessment to have positive outcomes for all those involved (Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996). A strength focus approach has the ability to enhance the parent-child relationship by sharing what the child can do well and all parties then work together to build on this. Self esteem is enhanced as another positive outcome. When weaknesses are focused on, there is the potential for assessment to have a negative effect on the parent-child relationship as well as on the child's confidence.

It has been argued that parents are more likely to be involved in their child's education if they can exercise real decision making that directly affects the future of their children, therefore teachers need to create structures that invite dialogue (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Rosenthal and Young Sawyers (1996) conclude that there are several barriers to effective collaboration 'lack of teacher training in interpersonal skills, lack of family friendly school programs and difficulty in focusing on family and educational strengths act as barriers to effective collaborative systems' (p.195). For collaborative assessment to work well, there needs to be a shared understanding of the aims, purposes and benefits of the process as well as a shared commitment to the task. Teachers will need to take on the role of facilitators and enablers so parents will have sufficient information to make real contributions in the process. Parents will need to be made to feel welcome and valued in the assessment process (Pugh, 1988).

6. Re visioning assessment as a collaborative venture.

Although assessment can be one of the most difficult aspects of home-school relations, it is also one where close collaboration yields benefits (Hegarty, 1993). The assessment that is undertaken in schools and kindergartens and the type of involvement in the process by

teachers, parents, children and the community is largely dependent on who controls the process and the degree to which that person or persons is willing to share the process with others (Apple & Beane, 1995). Kearney (1992) believes that collaboration in the assessment process requires teachers to move toward a much broader understanding of sharing responsibility and ownership within the processes. Assessment could be the catalyst for greater collaborative decision making and action from a much wider group of parents which could result in feelings of empowerment and commitment (Bloom, 1995).

Gowing (1996) challenges educators to look at their own assessment practices through critical lenses, and work with members of their community to ensure that social justice and democracy are present in all their teaching, learning and assessment practices to ensure the interests of all children and their families are being served.

Documentation is one process that enables communication to take place around learning (Nutbrown, 1996; Elliott, 1999). The results of this study showed that many kindergarten teachers were not keeping assessment information on children. Prep grade teachers kept more assessment information which tended to be used as evidence to show that children had achieved particular outcomes. When reporting their methods of assessment used, no teachers listed portfolios or any similar pedagogical documentation. If teachers, parents and children were involved in putting together a portfolio representing a child's learning journey, communication around assessment would immediately be available for all parties to share in.

7. Conclusion

When comparing the literature on effective assessment methods and the approaches that have been used by teachers as a result of the current policies, it is clear that there is a big gap between what research and theory constitutes as worthwhile and what actually happens in practice. There appears to be a need to empower teachers in the decision making process about the assessment practices that will be most beneficial to them rather than allowing practices to emerge from a policy either explicitly or through its detailed requirements. There were few examples in the current study of kindergarten teachers and prep grade teachers setting broad goals for children, or making curriculum and assessment practices relevant to children and their families in collaboration with parents.

Seefeldt (1998) stated that we have not yet reached the ideal method of assessing children's learning. The results of this study would support this statement. While some teachers have provided descriptions of excellent practice that linked teaching, learning and assessment, and examples have been provided of teachers using a strength focus to build on children's emerging understandings, these positive assessment approaches were not found to be common practice in this study. In contrast there were examples of assessment information being kept for accountability purposes, using summative approaches, to sum up children's achievements rather than using formative approaches that could support learning. There were also several examples of teachers only assessing children to identify problems or concerns.

Empowerment is a concept that may be linked to sharing the decision making. There is the opportunity to use the results of this study to support teachers to empower parents, children and the community to work together to improve teaching, learning and assessment as well as to ensure that the learning is functional, relevant and meaningful to children and their families.

Assessment therefore needs to be re visioned as a collaborative venture where teachers, parents, children and the community can understand its potential to positively inform and promote learning.

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