

Early Education



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- TLIF Round 5: The use of tools for reviewing shifts in practice and learning outcomes
- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
- The past, present and future of rural playcentres
- ECE and COVID-emotional factors for teachers and leaders
- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years





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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Using scale tools to enhance communication practices at Daisies Te Pihinga

A TLIF Round 5 inquiry

Anne Meade and Meg Kwan

Daisies Early Education and Care Centre in Johnsonville, Wellington was opened in 2008. Teachers in the original house, Te Purapura, gained a reputation for research-based innovations, such as Nature Explore excursions into bush and streams and climbing Tarikākā, the highest mountain in Wellington (aka Mt Kaukau). A second house, Te Pihinga, opened next door 11 years later. Each house is licenced for 30 children.

One feature of Daisies' pedagogy is plenty of talking between teachers and children—both at the centre and during explorations of the slopes of Tarikākā mountain. 'Slow down, sit down and talk' has been a mantra for years. Teachers' descriptive commenting is embedded in their RIE-based practices with infants and toddlers (Petrie & Owen, 2005). Talking about feelings is integral to teachers' positive guidance. Helpfully, Daisies' key teacher system means two-plus teachers know each child and family well.

In January 2019, Daisies' team decided its focus for professional learning for the year would be on sustained shared thinking (SST) conversations. Iram Siraj-Blatchford coined the phrase 'sustained shared thinking' whilst undertaking longitudinal research (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock & Bell, 2002). The researchers found these types of conversations to be significant for children's successful life pathways. Their definition of sustained shared thinking (SST) is,

An episode in which two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend. (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p. 157)

About the time Daisies Te Pihinga house opened in mid-2019, we learned that Daisies, alongside Te Puna Reo o Ngā Kākano (a Kaupapa Māori centre), had been awarded Teacher-Led Innovation Funding (TLIF) for an inquiry using scale tools relevant to the communication strand of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). Saying 2019 was an intense year is an understatement. 2020 became more intense—doing an inquiry during a pandemic! This article focuses on our Daisies' inquiry.

The inquiry project at Daisies

Daisies' education leaders decided to investigate using the SST-related scale tool (Siraj, Kingston & Melhuish, 2015) designed by the researchers who had found the long-term impact of SST on children. Our goal was to trial the tool for professional learning (not for research) to help enrich teaching practices that foster children's communication competencies and thinking. The goal of Te Puna Reo was, as always, to strengthen te reo Māori (the heritage

language of Māori people). Both teams wanted to add another reflective tool to their Learning Stories assessments for learning.

Two scale tools were chosen by the inquiry partnership:

- Assessing Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale (Siraj et al, op. cite); and
- *Teacher Ratings of Language and Literacy* (TROLL) (Dickinson, McCabe & Sprague, 2001).

The SSTEWS Scale tool was designed for research purposes and/or to guide early childhood teaching practice. Case studies of stand-out centres by Siraj and colleagues pinpointed specific practices that strengthen children's wellbeing, thinking and communication in the short- and long-term. These specific practices form the most impactful indicators in the SSTEWS scale.

TLIF projects are required to study learning outcomes. TROLL is an evidence-based tool developed by literacy researchers (Dickinson et al, 2001, op. cit.) for assessing children's language-use and literacy skills. Our inquiry only used the eight language-use items, not the literacy ones.

This article focuses on our inquiry comprising gathering data using scale tools and workshops based on the tools and our findings. Here we share:

- what teachers found by using TROLL to assess child language-use three times in a year and participated in a series of Daisies professional learning workshops drawing on TOLL and SSTEWS; and
- what happened when teachers became more intentional in facilitating children's language-use and deeper thinking, drawing inspiration from indicators in SSTEWS items.

Why inquire?

Susan Stacey says,

When we play, as children or as adults, we explore, wonder, and investigate. We try out varied ways of doing things and adapt our approaches. As humans we are constantly playing with new ideas and strategies, and we learn from this play—this discovery through playing with ideas. What's more, we have fun doing it; we are motivated to continue with play, as we find it interesting and engaging. (Stacey, 2019, p. 9)

Education leaders had questioned whether Daisies team members'—and early learning sector's teachers'—reliance on Learning Stories (Carr & Lee, 2012) for assessing for learning was sufficient for consistency in teaching and equitable learning outcomes. We decided to 'play' with using scale tools—not for formal research, but for professional learning and development (PLD) purposes. The PLD would be data-informed—*informed by our data*, creative and fun.

Our inquiry approaches

Our inquiry question discussed in this article was:

- How does kaiako (teacher) use of TROLL and SSTEWS scale tools increase the quality of sustained shared thinking conversations and improve child oral language competency?

Daisies' inquiry project involved three rounds of data collection with the two scale tools (in August 2019, and January and October 2020). Using TROLL, teachers in Te Pihinga house—where children's ages range from rising 3- to 5-years-old—assessed individual children's language use. In workshops, each child's key teacher collaborated with one or more teachers to rate each child's language use on eight items. Workshops were rewarding professional learning experiences. TROLL felt relevant for teachers and Meg's adult learning processes were enjoyed.

To score each child high on the scale, teachers needed to recall examples of a child's language. If the pair could not give examples, they asked other colleagues. None? Then the rating was low. Collaboration increased the validity of the rating.

Below is one TROLL item; it asks:

- How would you describe this child's pattern of **asking questions** about topics that interests him/her (e.g., why things happen, why people act the way they do)? Assign the score that best describes the child's approach to displaying curiosity by asking adults questions.

The four-point scale ranges from Low:

- iii. To your knowledge, the child has never asked an adult a question reflecting curiosity about why things happen or why people do things,

to High ...

4. Child often asks adults questions reflecting curiosity. These often lead to interesting, extended conversations.

Discussion was important for rating and for deepening reflection. Teachers' collective recall about when and where the child asked questions gave pointers for future sustained conversations. They wrote a goal for extending each child's language.

Once TROLL forms were completed, teachers had data to guide micro-teaching whilst playing with children and to share with parents.

After TROLL ratings were completed, Anne collated the ratings across all children into eight "box-and-whisker plots" — one plot per item. She shared them at the next team workshop. The box plots visibly revealed three areas of child language use that were rated low for a majority of the children:

- Child being able to communicate personal experiences outside of Daisies in a clear logical way.

- Child asks adults questions about topics that interest him/her, e.g., asks why things happen.
- Child able to recognise and produce rhymes.

Lively debates erupted about possible reasons for these findings, and thoughtful proposals for changes to practice were made.

Here's one story of a data-informed workshop when the team noticed they knew little about most children's ability to recognise and produce rhymes.

Collectively, the team concluded that low-ratings for most children's rhyming was a comment on the teachers' sub-optimal recognising and responding to children's interest in rhyming, not a comment on children's skills. Ouch! The team acknowledged that currently few of them were reading stories written in rhyming prose; nor were they sharing rhyming poetry. Confronted with this gap in their pedagogy, teachers rapidly re-introduced poems and books with text that rhymed, such as Dr Seuss books with more than a hint of silliness. As well, some teachers launched into spontaneous joke-rhymes at different times of the day. One example was,

Put your finger on your chin,

Put your finger in the bin!

[Laughter]

Put your finger on your toes,

Put your finger in the ____!

[Children completed the line with a word that rhymed, often humorous and accompanied by giggles]

The benefits were immediately positive. Children enjoyed a bigger selection of rhyming books and poetry with joy — Lynley Dodd became the favourite author. Children made up rhymes and

noticed their teachers and peers making rhymes.

Making scale tools meaningful

Right from the start, gathering data using the TROLL tool was seen as professionally meaningful by the teachers, especially for ‘their’ group of key children. TROLL shone a light on the strengths in those children’s language-use *and* on aspects of language that needed additional support.

Initially however, SSTEWE felt more distant, less meaningful—in part because Meg was the only teacher who gathered SSTEWE data. The project leads designed three workshops to increase knowledge about and interest in SSTEWE. First, in threes, the teaching team were given a set of cards, one for each SSTEWE indicator. Each trio placed the indicator cards onto columns labelled Inadequate, Minimal, Good and Excellent, defending each placement. The game—and the mistakes made—helped teachers realise the importance of intentional teaching for boosting sustained shared thinking.

Indicators at the Excellent end of scales included, “Staff encourage children to make links between the story, book, song or rhyme and their previous experiences”. Daisies’ teachers read a lot of stories and sing songs daily. But, encouraging children to *make links* between stories, books and rhymes *and* their own prior experiences was not commonplace.

This changed. The game had prompted changes in practice in the form of more intentional teaching to strengthen such links.

Second, individual teachers were released for 90 minutes (alongside Anne) to observe the rest of their team, using two SSTEWE items to shape their observations. Then each scored the team’s practice. Scoring sharpened each teacher’s focus on the indicators of Good and Excellent practice—when and where did these practices happen? Without exception, teachers said they spotted additional ways for lifting their *own* practice by observing their colleagues through the lens of the research-based SSTEWE indicators.

Third, after Meg had completed a formal round of observations using a few SSTEWE Scale items, the team discussed and interpreted the results. From the beginning, Well-being items were scored high. Great. However, low scores for some Sustained Shared Thinking items were confronting. Through their interpretation discussions, the team was motivated to make changes to their practice. Collectively the teachers set tangible goals for what changes in practice would look like. These were noted on large chart posted beside the staff room meeting table. Post-It™ stickies were supplied, and individual teachers noted the specific practice they had used to help children make progress. The visibility of the charts and of their own trials of changed practices kept the goals front of mind.

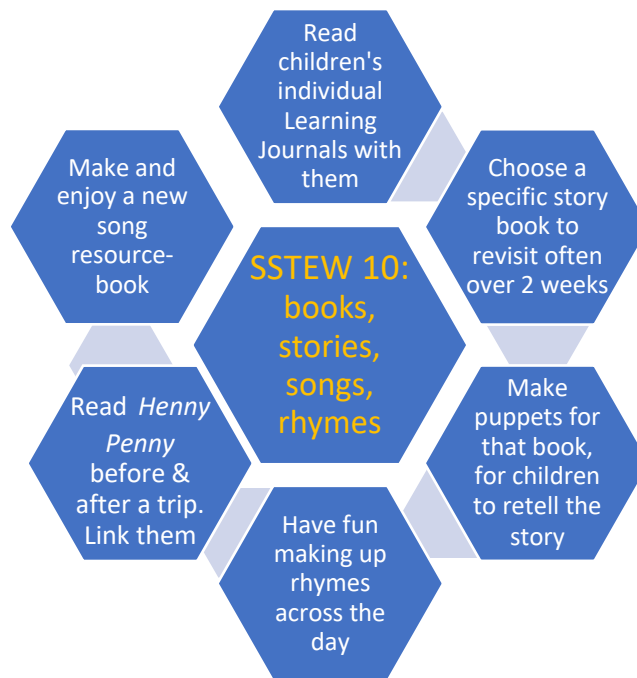


Figure 1. Encouraging sustained shared thinking through storytelling, sharing books, singing and rhymes: Goals for achieving 'Good'

Four SSTEWE items were chosen by Meg and Anne for the Daisies' inquiry to be constants in our inquiry-related workshops designed by Meg as education leader. Two were given the most PLD attention:

Item 10: Encouraging sustained shared thinking through storytelling, sharing books, singing and rhymes.

And

Item 12: Supporting children's concept development and higher-order thinking.

Item 12 proved to be more challenging than Item 10. The latter was more familiar as it aligns with a learning outcome in the Communication strand of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Indicators at the Good and Excellent points on Item 12 included: "Staff supporting the children in thinking through what they were doing and extending it ... through asking simple open and closed questions," "Planning shows evidence of learning intentions that lead to questions designed to support and extend thinking and problem-solving," and "Children are encourage to evaluate their activities and play ..." (in

other words, question themselves). Item 12 indicators signal the importance of teachers intentionally planning the sorts of questions they could pose to support children's curiosity and extend their thinking

Ah-ha moment

At one TLIF workshops, Daisies' teachers were collectively pondering what changes would encourage more children to wonder out loud and express their curiosity (TROLL items). One of them spotted a link between SSTEWE item 12 and the two TROLL items where our data were not improving, namely the TROLL items about children asking questions and expressing curiosity. Great spotting. Another teacher said,

I've been trying to use some indicators in SSTEWE. Yesterday, I buried some objects in the sandpit (not in a Treasure box which we don't use). The children were asking lots of questions. There's a buzz of curiosity there again today.

From that moment of recognition that SSTEWE indicators had practical value, teachers turned to SSTEWE for ideas to lift their practice when new strategies seemed called for. SSTEWE

had become personally-professionally relevant and meaningful.

Findings from the TROLL scale tool

i. Across the three rounds of using the TROLL scale tool, the ratings climbed.

The ratings climbed between September 2019 and late January 2020, and again between Term 1 and October 2020. The same individual children were rated between Rounds 1 and 2 and the same individuals between Rounds 2 and 3.

Teachers agreed that the lifts in ratings were partly explained by the children in the sample growing older and more competent in their language use. However, they argued that their focus on sustained-shared-thinking conversations contributed as well because there was a similar mix of 3- and 4-year-olds in each period.

ii. By Round 3, a bigger number of items had a rating 4.

A bigger number of ratings at level 4 was gratifying. Some children scored a four on almost all items and they were deemed to be “flying” with their language learning and development.

Some targeted teaching support for other children was highlighted via the TROLL tool. “Children recognising and producing rhymes” was still rated lower than other items in Round 3. Teachers embraced the data as a tool and audibly increased opportunities for rhyming.

iii. The proportion of ratings 1 and 2 were lower in Round 3.

There were fewer ratings of 1 and 2 in Round 3 compared with Rounds 1 and 2. Teacher focus on supporting children’s language use in 2020 had an impact on strengthening language competency.

iv. Two areas of language use showed continued need for increased teacher attention.

The two TROLL items with lower collated medians and ratings were:

- child’s pattern of asking questions about topics of interest or why things happen (Q. 3); and

- children verbally express their curiosity (Q. 8).

We wondered: Were the adults dominating in asking questions? Did teachers need to listen more attentively?

Findings from the SSTEW scale tool

Positive movement up the SSTEW scales to Excellence ratings were found in rounds 2 and 3.

- Daisies teaching approaches benefitted children’s well-being throughout the project, which showed in our Well-being item findings.
- Marked shifts in teaching practice from Adequate to Excellent were observed for other selected SSTEW items.
- Teachers used more best-practice indicators included in Good and Excellent ratings in their micro-teaching for the benefit of children’s learning.
- Teachers at workshops created new collective teaching goals, e.g., add more science experiments.
- Increasingly often, children engaged in sustained conversations with teachers about topics that stretched their thinking.

Taking action

Teachers collectively used their data (from both scale tools), and the experience of trialling SSTEW observations themselves, to analyse, critique and change their practice. After the workshops, changes were observed in teachers’ curriculum and pedagogy:

- Increased teacher knowledge about language-use development as well as heightened awareness of individual children’s language competencies led teachers to actively name children’s learning, e.g., “Jo, I heard you make a rhyme”, and to set goals for individuals and groups of children.
- Reference to TROLL items and SSTEW indicators became common in team discussions.

- Teachers improved aspects of intentional practice prominent in Good and Excellent SSTEW ratings.
- Data-informed PLD shifted from general planning to specific strategies.
- Teachers' questions changed: "What would you like to do?" became "What would you like to *learn*?"
- Teachers became increasingly comfortable with SSTEW items as they noticed how items and indicators mapped onto *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) goals and learning outcomes.
- Frequency of rhyming increased and more books with rhyming language were chosen.
- Role-modelling the language of curiosity occurred: teachers used more open-ended questioning, and more consciously spoke about their own wonderings and thoughts.
- Scientific and mathematical concepts were spoken about more often.
- Pleasingly, sustained shared thinking conversations became more frequent.

In feedback forms designed for the inquiry, teachers commented on learning a lot from observing other team members, e.g., teachers who used more scientific language or had fun with rhymes.

Mentoring nudges daily from Meg Kwan (wearing her education leader 'hat') reminded teachers of the tools and our findings. The inquiry team believe these nudges were important for teachers sustaining changes in practices that resulted in positive communication outcomes for children. Overall, professional *development* built on professional learning.

Evaluating the impact of actions

There was a noticeable shift in the teaching culture through working with new tools with the aim of strengthening the *mana* of all children. The shift started with teachers paying

attention to the initial round of data—some of them confronting—as well as unpacking the indicators in the scale tools.

Teachers were able to bring about positive change using the scale tools, in ways that fitted their ways of working.

"I struggle to [change] through just reading. Using these scales helped give direction for good practice and [now] I consider practices that were out of the norm for me, but they [scale tools] have highlighted their importance and value."

Through doing TROLL ratings, teachers gained a heightened awareness of equity issues, e.g., which children never joined in story times, or who could benefit from additional support through more focused micro-teaching at appropriate moments. This awareness and new professional commitments came through strongly on teachers' evaluation forms.

[Using and discussing TROLL scales] has helped me to have next steps for my key tamariki oral language. ... They helped me look at SSTEW scales [indicators] and see which of these would support next steps for key children. It has also helped planning for small groups.

[Observing, using and discussing TROLL items] has helped my practice a lot—keeping in mind where each child needed strengthening of their language communication and comprehension has become stronger by looking at the scales and gaining knowledge.

Conclusion: Using scale tools informs practice and strengthens learning

Using scale tools for both professional development and to support assessment for tamariki learning was a new concept for

teachers at Daisies. By the end of the inquiry project, they had become accustomed to scale tools and said they valued the professional learning that came from the tools and from related workshops.

The nature of the professional learning from collecting data, analysing, and interpreting data, and then planning improvements engaged kaiako in deeply satisfying professional development. This inquiry provoked professional *development* beyond professional learning; their changes had an impact on children (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007).

Investigation is a stated hallmark in Daisies' philosophy of practice. Participating in the TLIF inquiry resulted in the teaching team adopting an inquiry stance for themselves (Grudnoff, Ell, Haigh, Hill & Tocker, 2019) and enjoying it.

In 2021, Daisies' teachers have asked for further professional learning opportunities using SSTEWS, motivated to "continued to play" (Stacey, 2019) with scale tools. They use TROLL to check on equity of outcomes for children re language use as well as to evaluate their practice for strengthening competent and confident communicators.

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