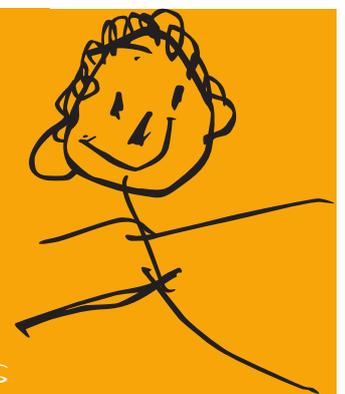


Early Education



Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021

- 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 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.
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- 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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Together is best - partnership in assessment in a digital world

Janice Pennells

When teachers and whānau share ideas about children's learning the possibilities for understanding and extending a child's development is enriched. The New Zealand (NZ) early childhood curriculum embraces this partnership with the understanding that whānau, a child's parents and extended family, will contribute expert knowledge of the child to enrich formative assessment practices. With the advent of digital communications, there has been a shift towards whānau and teachers communicating about children's learning through an ePortfolio. This article draws predominately on NZ research discussing whānau-teacher partnerships in formative assessment and how an ePortfolio has evolved as a tool for sharing information between home and the centre. Themes relating to the nature of whānau-teacher communication through an ePortfolio that have emerged are outlined. Lastly, I share my ongoing learning in ePortfolio usage, encouraging the reader to consider how teachers and whānau can utilise the ePortfolio to build collaborative understandings of children's interests/expertise in order to inform future learning.

Partnership in assessment — together is best

A collaborative partnership between whānau and teachers benefits children and underpins *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) with the principle of family and community acknowledging whānau as an integral part of the curriculum. Communication which includes the wider context of children's learning is central to understanding the people, places and things that are pivotal in influencing

the learning and development of the child (Cooper & Hedges, 2014). Therefore, when whānau and teachers work together to understand children's existing knowledge and preferred ways of learning teachers are best able to plan learning experiences that make a positive difference for the child (McLachlan, 2018). One way for teachers and whānau to build collaborative understandings of children's learning is through formative assessment (Drummond, 2012).

Formative assessment is described by Drummond (2012) "as the way in which in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use" (p. vii). A focus of formative assessment has grown in early childhood education (ECE) in recent years with the knowledge that children's learning is benefited when assessment acknowledges their existing skills and understandings. When teachers invite multiple perspectives and collaborate to analyse the information, planning the child's next steps in learning is informed (McLachlan, 2018). It is therefore crucial that whānau and teachers work together in the process of formative assessment to gather, share, and interpret children's learning. This aligns with *Te Whāriki* which affirms teachers' assessment practices includes finding out what children's interests are and learning about what they already know and can do. Documentation, commonly through learning stories, a narrative account of learning collated in portfolios, is a valued tool in formative assessment (Carr & Lee, 2019).

The concept of a learning story was developed to make visible understandings of a child's interests and knowledge. Written over time and with a sequence of notice, recognise and respond a learning story can be contributed to by teachers, whānau and the child. When utilised as such a learning story is formative, positively contributing to informing supportive pathways for ongoing learning (Carr & Lee, 2019).

Whilst whānau can enrich teachers' knowledge of their child, meaningful inclusion of the whānau perspective in learning stories is not necessarily easily achieved (Whyte, 2016). Despite teachers using multiple strategies to engage whānau in their child's learning, through formative assessment, inclusion is problematised by varied levels of understanding of the whānau role (Niles, 2016). Challenges have also included finding the time/being available to communicate, understanding the purpose of communications and inviting dialogue that is formative. Furthermore, differing areas of expertise of teachers and whānau can lead to an unintentional power imbalance (Pennells, 2018). Concepts including an Initiating Parent Voice Form (Whyte, 2016), Learning Snapshots (Hunt & Rawlins, 2016) and a Tri-assessment model (Werry et al., 2020) have shown that involving whānau can positively influence shared understandings of children's learning. These ideas have implications for thinking about multiple methods of communication that empower both whānau and teachers, and make a difference for children.

The nature of ePortfolio communications — a complex issue

Technology has influenced the way whānau and teachers can share information about children's learning. Evolving from paper-based

documentation, the ePortfolio, a digital mode of involving whānau in their child's learning, including their experiences both at home and in the centre, is now implemented widely throughout NZ (Carr & Lee, 2019; Hooker, 2017). The concept of an ePortfolio can assist whānau in understanding their child's learning and facilitate communication between whānau and teachers (Hooker, 2017), however little research has explored the ways these connections support children's learning. Furthermore, Higgins (2015) and Goodman and Cherrington (2015) found communication mostly occurred from centre to home problematising the notion of whānau and teachers working in partnership. A lack of knowledge shared from home to centre influences teachers formative assessment and how they can validate and build on the knowledge and skills children have already acquired.

Both hard copy and ePortfolios have the potential to strengthen relationships and support whānau understanding and participation in their child's learning. For example, portfolios can act as a link between home and centre positioning the child and whānau as having skills and knowledge to contribute. By learning about whānau expertise and everyday ways of being and doing, otherwise known as their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), teachers can establish reciprocated trust (Hedges et al., 2019). Teachers in Beaumont-Bates' (2016) study, investigating how ePortfolios supported collaborative partnerships, reported whānau participation in ePortfolios increased teachers understanding of children's lives in their home context including drawing on whānau funds of knowledge. However, it is not clear how whānau contributions informed the direction of learning given the data suggests stories were written by teachers.



An ePortfolio (accessible on a range of smart devices) and/or hard copy portfolio can act as a link positioning the whānau as knowledgeable. Photos/videos shared from home can strengthen relationships and support teachers to better understand, and respond to, the skills and expertise children bring with them.

The nature of effective two-way whānau-teacher communication using an ePortfolio is complex. Where reciprocal exchanges occur, these do not always inform learning. An example being the informal nature of online communication with responses commonly offering praise, acknowledgement, or a concurring statement (Higgins & Cherrington, 2017). It appears the advent of ePortfolio usage has improved the accessibility and frequency of communication and facilitated keeping whānau

connected with their child's learning in the centre (Beaumont-Bates, 2016, Penman, 2014). However, findings show there is still room to learn more about how whānau-teacher exchanges, through an ePortfolio, validates knowledge shared from home in a way that makes a difference for children.

Using an ePortfolio — a reflection

Like many teachers I strive for assessment that acknowledges a strong partnership with whānau. After twenty years teaching in ECE I am still passionate about valuing the contextual knowledge whānau have of their child. Connecting with the interests, skills and existing expertise of children is an aspect of my teaching that is exciting and beneficial in supporting children. The advent of digital communication has led me to continue to inquire into elements of my practice to support my effective use of ePortfolios. Here are some reflective thoughts.

Actively engaging whānau in the formative assessment process is part of a teacher's responsibility. The accessible/timely nature of an ePortfolio opens greater possibilities though we must be mindful of sharing information that is useful to whānau involvement rather than reporting facts (Elliot, 2003). In my experience it is challenging to gain a whānau perspective if I have already completed all sections of a learning story. Being flexible when using predetermined templates with language that is not technical/educational can be more inviting to a whānau than a box to fill in or trying to think of something to align with a learning focus identified by teachers. For example, I have found some whānau prefer to respond with a photo/video rather than written words. Furthermore, a request for a whānau perspective is a great conversation starter. Many whānau will happily discuss/respond verbally to what has been shared online potentially enriching both the interpretation of learning and the planned pathways forward. Being open to multiple modes of information sharing and working together is best.

In our teaching role we often seek whānau feedback in relation to a specific interest noticed in the centre however it is important that any information shared (photos/videos/verbal) is acknowledged. I have found a follow up conversation or a reciprocal ePortfolio comment has been a valuable way of explaining why their contribution is valued. Furthermore, an ePortfolio is not always accessible for children, consequently any documentation/pictures must be made visible (hard copy) to allow the child to spontaneously revisit/recall their learning (Hooker, 2019). Whānau can then see their contributions valued and positively making a difference for their child. Hard copy portfolios are great for older children, similarly photos from home displayed on the wall or in a small individual book are more accessible for younger children. Moreover, this minimises the danger of an ePortfolio becoming exclusively a tool for whānau and teachers to communicate and enables all teachers to build a wider contextual knowledge of the child/whānau.



Photos shared from home through an ePortfolio should be made accessible to children in varying ways.

Children’s learning is multidirectional therefore assessment that is formative will also be complex (McLachlan, 2018). I have found both spontaneous and intentional assessment artefacts, collated in an ePortfolio, provide insight in planning experiences that authentically recognise children’s current interests. For example, in assisting a child working towards the learning outcome “expressing their feelings and ideas using a range of materials and modes” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 25), I continued to instinctively gather assessment information to inform my pedagogical decision-making. Alongside planned experiences, documented as annotated photos, learning stories, the child’s artwork, and a video recording (intentional assessment), I also invited and responded to additional information whānau shared through conversation and/or photos/videos in the child’s ePortfolio (spontaneous assessment). This included learning the child’s preferred songs and favoured creative experiences at home, understanding the connections to the child’s interest in diggers and learning about whānau connections with art. The ePortfolio was a valuable tool in timely sharing between home and centre and enriched my understandings of, and meaningful responses to, the child’s multiple skills, knowledge, and interests.

Having a shared understanding about the intended purpose of ePortfolios is paramount. Recently when explaining to a new parent why we value working in partnership she prompted my thinking by asking ‘tell me more about the ePortfolio’. I described it as a two-way information sharing platform about her child’s learning and experiences both at home and in the centre. Being clear that working together is best and emphasising an equitable relationship where whānau knowledge of their child enriches what teachers notice will encourage whānau to share information about their child and whānau (Cowie & Mitchell, 2015). For example, photos of weekend activities collecting wood/gardening assisted in linking with the whānau funds of knowledge which are often embedded in everyday tasks. This has been valuable to me in recognising and responding to the skills/knowledge the child has already acquired through participating in whānau life (Cooper & Hedges, 2014).

Conclusion

This article has shown that an ePortfolio holds potential for enriching the way teachers and whānau can work together to best understand and support children’s learning. The findings of research used to inform this article, together with my own experiences, highlights the importance of teachers reflecting critically on their use of ePortfolios and how they can creatively utilise the accessibility and timely nature of digital communication. When whānau and teachers both have a shared understanding of the purpose of communications with a culture of ‘together is best’ the support a child is afforded will be enriched. Used with thought and purpose an ePortfolio can assist whānau-teacher communication to make meaningful connections that count for children. Let’s embrace communicating in the digital world and enjoy discovering how it can add richness to our partnerships and excitement to the lives of our children as “competent confident learners” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.6).

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