



Part 1: The purpose of play-based assessment in kindergarten

Introduction

Assessing children's learning is key to the curriculum planning cycle and an essential part of teachers' and educators' professional work in any education setting. While assessment has been part of the language of early childhood curricula for more than a decade, there is continuing debate about:

- the purpose of assessment in early childhood education and care (ECEC)
- what this could look like in a play-based learning and teaching setting
- sustainable approaches and strategies to documentation.

In this two-part research insights series, we draw on research and practice wisdom to reflect on these questions and think about assessment in kindergarten in Queensland. In Part 1, we discuss the purpose of assessment in play-based teaching and learning, assessment as pedagogy and the role of critical reflection in supporting meaningful assessment. In Part 2, we focus on adult and child intentionality and the role of teachers and children in assessment, and offer some practical strategies to embed assessment practices meaningfully and sustainably in play-based education programs.

What is the purpose of assessment in kindergarten settings?

Based on a review of international literature, Barblett et al. (2021) contend the purpose of assessment in ECEC is to enable teachers and educators to observe and support learning, development and wellbeing in *evidence-based* ways. In everyday practice, teachers and educators observe and document children's engagement in the kindergarten program, interpret and build a rich picture of learning over time, and use the insights gathered to inform, monitor and support ongoing learning and teaching (Grieshaber, 2018; Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024).

Assessment practices in kindergarten are informed by the service philosophy, early childhood theories and pedagogies, and the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (QKLG), and will look different to strategies used by teachers and educators in school. Despite looking different, assessment remains an integral part of the curriculum planning cycle. Without a planned and embedded approach to assessment, it is difficult to really know strengths and gaps in children's knowledge and skills, and whether our pedagogical choices are having the desired impact (Cloney et al., 2019). This is important for all children, and particularly important for children who may benefit from targeted early developmental support and/or early intervention.

Defining assessment in kindergarten settings:

Aligned to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF V2.0) (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), the QKLG (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024, p. 16) describes assessment as:

an ongoing, strengths-based process of gathering and analysing information about what children know, understand and can do using a range of strategies.

Assessment is further *defined* in terms of purpose, leading to the identification of three *types of assessment* undertaken in the kindergarten setting:

1. **Assessment for children's learning, development and wellbeing.**

Formative or ongoing assessment practices designed to monitor children's learning, provide timely feedback on learning, and inform future planning.

2. **Assessment of children's learning, development and wellbeing.**

Summative assessment practices designed to evaluate where children are in their learning at a particular point in time. This involves drawing together observations and insights on individual learning over an extended period, e.g. mid-year reflective conversations with children and families, end-of-year transition statements.

3. **Assessment as learning.**

Proactively engaging children in formative and summative assessment of their own learning, development and wellbeing. As the term suggests, this supports the development of key learning dispositions, including self-reflection and self-assessment, and enriches our teaching evidence base by providing access to children's views and experiences of learning and teaching.

Each type of assessment serves a different purpose, and skilled kindergarten teachers and educators embed all three in their everyday practice to support and strengthen learning and teaching across the kindergarten year.

Assessment as pedagogy

Meaningful assessment in kindergarten is a considered and continuous practice grounded in specialist early childhood knowledge and skills. In planning and assessing, teachers and educators draw on their:

- professional knowledge, e.g. theory, research, pedagogy and praxis
- local knowledge, in particular, relationships and knowledge of individual children
- deep understanding of the curriculum, in this case, the QKLG
- professional skills, including observation, interpretation and analysis, documentation and communication of learning and teaching
- ability to engage in critical reflection and to exercise informed professional judgment.

The emphasis here is that meaningful assessment has a holistic focus and is embedded in pedagogical decision-making. Our interest extends beyond content knowledge to consider how the child is building on or consistently demonstrating their knowledge, skills and dispositions in a variety of familiar and new situations.

Reflection

ECEC is a values-based profession. The QKLG identifies eight principles to guide pedagogical decision-making in kindergarten.

Choose one or two of these and consider how they guide your assessment pedagogy and practices:

1. Respectful relationships
2. Collaborative partnerships
3. High expectations, equity and respect for diversity
4. Effective pedagogies
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives
6. Sustainability
7. Collaborative leadership and teamwork
8. Critical reflection.

Critical reflection

Critically reflecting on practice is a defining characteristic of professionalism in ECEC and a key enabler of effective teaching and learning (Marbina et al., 2015; Barblett et al., 2021) and, thereby, meaningful assessment.

While an expectation under the National Quality Standard (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2024), it can sometimes be difficult to evidence critical reflection in and on practice. Designing and embedding rigorous and meaningful assessment practices in the kindergarten program provides an opportunity to evidence critical reflection while also building team capability. The EYLF V2.0 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p.18) distinguishes between reflection and critical reflection:

Reflection involves educators thinking intentionally about their own and others' practices, with certain aims or goals in mind.

Critical reflection is a meaning-making process that involves a deeper level of thinking and evaluation. It requires engagement with diverse perspectives, including philosophy, theory, ethics and practice, and then evaluating these in context, leading to pedagogical decisions and actions that are transformative.

Reflection involves active and deliberative engagement with a topic, most often informed by personal views and experiences (Brownlee et al., 2021). Critical reflection takes reflective practice to a deeper level, and is characterised by engagement with multiple perspectives, weighing up ideas, and being able to explain and justify decisions and actions (Lunn Brownlee & Irvine, 2022).

Translating this to practice, assessment involves gathering different sources of information and considering multiple perspectives (e.g. theory, research, observations taken in different contexts, child and adult perspectives) to support evidence-based decision-making. The scope of assessment in kindergarten is also multidimensional, spanning learning (i.e. children's engagement in the educational program, progress towards learning and development goals) and teaching (i.e. the effectiveness of the learning environment and our pedagogical choices).

Reflection

Some questions to guide critical reflection on assessment might include:

- What are we interested in assessing and why? Bearing in mind the learning and development areas (Grieshaber, 2018).
- Who needs to be involved, and how will we support their meaningful involvement?
- What needs to be considered to support inclusive and culturally responsive assessment practices in our kindergarten context? Drawing on our local knowledge.
- How do you use assessment practices to inform decision-making about the level of support a child needs, and what learning they are ready for next?

Conclusion

Assessment is a part of the work we do. In Part 1, we have explored the purpose of assessment with reference to the different types of assessment, reflected on assessment as pedagogy and the importance of critical reflection in assessment. A key aspect of this is the need to critically reflect on practice to contextualise assessment to your unique setting.

Part 2 of this research insights series will consider intentionality and practical ways to embed meaningful and sustainable assessment practices in the kindergarten program.

Kindergarten research insights contributors



Susan Irvine is an early childhood teacher with diverse work experience in early childhood education and care, spanning policy, service provision and higher education. She is currently a professor of early childhood in the School of Education at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include: ECEC policy and quality standards, workforce development, leadership and professional practice. Susan was a member of the research team for the Australian Learning Frameworks Updates project.



Georgia Irvine Casey is an experienced early childhood teacher currently working at Goodstart Red Hill. With over 12 years in the ECEC sector, she has worked in kindergarten, long day care and outside school hours care, and in ECEC policy. Georgia is passionate about bridging research and practice in early education. In 2022, she completed a Master of Education at Queensland University of Technology, furthering her commitment to evidence-informed teaching.

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