

Exemplar Assessment for All Learners in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This article defines assessment exemplars and considers their purpose in New Zealand school and early childhood contexts. The role of exemplars in supporting assessment for learning and the extent to which education rights and inclusive practice are evident in exemplars are considered. The article suggests that learners with special education needs are not clearly represented within the *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars*, but that diverse abilities are included in the early childhood exemplars. A number of questions are posed for consideration within future exemplar development in order to ensure that learners with special education needs are positively represented and included.

Position Paper

Keywords

Assessment tool, curriculum, educational assessments, effective practices, inclusion practices, learning stories, special needs, teacher development, Te Whāriki.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 10 years, exemplars have been introduced to New Zealand schools and early childhood settings as a new assessment strategy. This paper considers exemplars that are currently available in New Zealand and how the exemplars support goals of inclusive practice for all learners. Such consideration is important for educators at a time when the use of exemplars is increasingly embedded in teacher assessment practices, and as projects proceed that are developing curriculum exemplars specifically for learners with special education needs.

DEFINING EXEMPLARS

A dictionary definition of “exemplar” defines the word as a ‘model or pattern’ or ‘typical or parallel instance’ (Deverson, 2005, p. 372). Exemplary objects are ‘fit to be imitated, outstandingly good’ or ‘illustrative; representative’ (Deverson, 2005, p. 372). ‘The exemplar serves as a showcase of “best practice” assessment efforts’ (Eastern Kentucky University, 2005).

There can be exemplars of many different aspects of education. Two types of international exemplars include *exemplars of practice* in Scotland (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2005), and *exemplar lessons* in Italy (teachnet, 2006). When narrowing the field to assessment, exemplars have included the following:

- exemplary student responses, for example student work graded in the “A” range

- expected test answers, i.e. exemplars and rubrics of predicted responses
- exemplars of student achievement that illustrate the range of achievement that could exist in any given level or age (low, average and high achievement)
- snapshots of learning that exemplify a larger experience or sequence of events.

Within curriculum assessment exemplar material produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, three different definitions exist:

An annotated sample of student work produced in response to a set task. Each exemplar illustrates student work based on a particular topic and strand of ... *the New Zealand Curriculum*. (Ministry of Education, 2003a)

A sample of authentic student work annotated to illustrate learning, achievement, and quality in relation to ... *the New Zealand Curriculum*. (Ministry of Education, 2003b, 2003c, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d – teacher notes p. 1)

Exemplars are **examples of assessments** that **make visible learning that is valued** so that the **learning community** (children, whānau, teachers, and others) can foster **ongoing and diverse learning pathways**. (Ministry of Education, 2004e, booklet one, p. 3, original emphasis)

These definitions illustrate an important shift toward acknowledgment that assessment should be *authentic*; that is, assessment exemplars should be of real student work and experiences rather than contrived answers and rubrics. The definitions also highlight the importance of teacher involvement through annotation, and through defining the learning that is valued. The important emergence of the word ‘authentic’ in the definition during 2003 is also critical to highlight.

PURPOSES FOR USING EXEMPLARS

In New Zealand, exemplars have been produced in two quite different ways by the Ministry of Education. The *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d) have focused on samples of student work moderated to a level. The purpose of these exemplars includes the provision of tangible reference points for levels and the development of consistency of expectations between schools. This aids teachers to decide the “best fit”

level for a student in particular curriculum areas (maths, English, the arts, science, social studies, health & physical education, and technology). The purpose of deciding on a level relates to selection of the most appropriate teaching and learning approaches for students, supported by inclusion within the exemplar resources of curriculum matrices which provide detailed progress indicators.

Schools are encouraged to develop sets of their own school based exemplars which could reflect the sociocultural context of the school and community. Anecdotally, the development process has been described as a powerful learning process for teachers (Poskitt, 2002). Schools that have their own exemplars have found the two sets to be complementary, with the national exemplars useful for moderation, reference points and clarification. Teachers valued the national exemplars for 'Affirming that our benchmarking of exemplars are in line with national assessment' (Poskitt, Brown, Goulton & Taylor, 2004, p. 28).

By contrast, the early childhood exemplars, *Kei Tua o te Pae Assessment for Learning* (Ministry of Education, 2004e) do not focus on levels. The exemplars are described as episodes of sociocultural learning in action. Teachers are integral to exemplars as they notice, recognise and respond to learners, although parents, education support workers and others can also record assessment narratives. The possible pathways for learning are not constrained by matrices of progress indicators.

The national early childhood exemplars provide illustrative models of how assessment narratives can be recorded for individuals. As a result of these exemplars, portfolios of narrative assessment are then compiled for individual children. The individual portfolio assessments in turn exemplify individual and social learning pathways within the context of the early childhood learning community.

Thus, school based and early childhood exemplars in New Zealand serve quite different purposes. Any discussion of exemplars needs to be mindful of commonalities and differences between the two groups. Development of future exemplars should have a clearly defined purpose and draw on the relevant strengths of each approach.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Assessment *for* learning (formative assessment), is not always the same as assessment *of* learning (summative assessment) (Absolum, 2006; Gardner, 2006). Assessment for learning is 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (University of Cambridge Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Formative assessment should support, inform and serve learning (Black, 2006) rather than merely quantify and report on learning.

A key aspect of assessment for learning is empowerment of the learner. In a New Zealand conference presentation, Sutton (2006) drew attention to the importance of three influences on learner motivation and thus achievement: feedback for self awareness, self efficacy and locus of control.

Effective assessment involves students, enhances their capacity for self and peer assessment, sustains motivation, and supports independence. Assessment for learning is thus also a key aspect of ensuring learning is personalised. 'Personalising learning has turned the traditional view of knowledge and learning on its head. Our focus has shifted from viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge to individuals who engage in a dynamic, two-way process' (Ministry of Education, 2006a). Key competencies (Hipkins, 2006; Rutherford, 2005) in the *Draft Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2006b) reflect this broader view of individual learning and achievement by acknowledging and valuing such competencies as participation, contribution and relationships with others.

The *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* and *Kei Tua o te Pae Early Childhood Exemplars* both aim to support formative assessment, but do so in different ways. One way this is particularly clear is with teacher thinking around possible pathways or "next step" learning. The *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* provide matrices which give explicit direction to teachers of expected learning progressions. The early childhood exemplars encourage teachers to draw on knowledge of the individual child within a holistic view of curriculum. Each of these approaches have strengths and limitations.

Initial evaluation of the curriculum exemplars (Poskitt, et al., 2004) suggests that teachers value exemplars as a formative assessment tool. The most frequent comment made to describe the difference that exemplars had made to teaching practice was that they supported teaching to be 'more informed/better focused' (p. 14) and the most frequent category of response to describe the impact of exemplars on student learning referred to 'improved teaching and learning' (p. 15). These aspects were rated by teachers as being more valuable than the matrices for identification of the specific level or sublevel of achievement. Nevertheless, evaluation of the national exemplar development project by Poskitt et al. (2004) indicates that further work is needed to support teachers to directly use exemplars with students and parents.

The early childhood exemplars strongly model the involvement of children and families in assessment, with booklets dedicated to *Children Contributing to their own Assessment* and *Assessment and Learning: Community* (Ministry of Education, 2004e, booklets 4 & 5). Children and their families commonly enjoy interacting with children's individual portfolios, as illustrated in Cameron's learning story in booklet 9 of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004e, p. 20). As teacher expertise develops, narrative assessment is becoming longer, wider and deeper (Carr, 2006; Cullen, Williamson & Lepper, 2005; Dunn & Barry, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2004e, booklet 7).

Carr (2006) notes that assessment should build on dimensions of strength, including:

- Agency and 'mindfulness (as learners begin "to make these part of their own identity and expertise")' (p. 2)
- Knowing that 'competencies *develop over time*: they are not acquired or possessed at some point in an education; they are strengthened (or weakened) by interactions.

- They are about interactions in contexts that are increasingly wide-ranging.
- They are about interactions in contexts that are *increasingly complex*' (p. 2)

By drawing on dimensions of strength, learners can 'navigate their own routes or journeys', 'develop a navigational capacity' and 'capacity to aspire' (Carr, 2006, p. 5).

The call for multiple routes towards achievement is one that we would support ... What we would like to do is to avoid an assessment which in its fixation on the discrete becomes atomised to the extent that the *relationships between and beyond are erased* ... (Newfield, Andrew, Stein & Maungedzo, 2003, pp. 77 & 79)

EDUCATION RIGHTS AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

There are several reasons why learners with special education needs should be considered; firstly, the rights of learners and families, and secondly, philosophical beliefs about inclusion and acceptance of diversity. In addition, evidence has shown that strategies that are effective for learners with special education needs are effective for all learners (Alton-Lee, 2003; Bevan-Brown, 2006; Florian, 2006; Rouse, 2006).

Inclusive education principles are further endorsed by the National Education Goals, National Administration Guidelines, Curriculum, and Special Education Policy Guidelines. Information provided to school Boards of Trustees (Ministry of Education, 2003d) included the following statements:

- Every child has the right to learn, to reach their potential.
- The aim of the government's special education policy is to improve learning outcomes for all students with special education needs – at their local school or wherever they attend school.
- The policy affirms the right of every student to learn.

These statements are underpinned by Section 8 of the 1989 *Education Act* (New Zealand Government), which provides for equal rights to primary and secondary education for all students, stating 'people who have special education needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education at state schools as people who do not' (p. 40). Although it is important that rights have legal status, it is also important that schools do not only enrol learners through coercion. A philosophical commitment to inclusion means that learners are respected and accepted, and diversity is valued.

The Education Review Office (2005) endorses at a systems level that 'Schools that are effective for ORRS-funded students are the same schools that are effective for all students. In these schools, school staff responded to the learning needs of students effectively' (Education Review Office, 2005, p. 1). Thus, through their consideration of special education, schools can enhance their effectiveness for all students. This clearly applies to the early childhood sector also.

Despite the rationale for inclusion, some teachers continue to view learners with special education needs as beyond their

realm of responsibility (MacArthur & Dight, 2000; Kearney & Kane, 2006; Perdue, Ballard & MacArthur, 2001) and have applied exclusionary practices (Massey University, 2002). Specialist staff, through their provision of support for learners, may inadvertently support teachers to devolve responsibility (Dunn & Barry, 2004). Identification of special needs also has an inherent tension between the desire to both identify the optimum learning level and ensure appropriate resources are obtained, versus the negative effects of labelling influencing low expectations, exclusion and discourses of difference. Ideally, "different" exemplars for learners with special education needs would not be needed in school settings; early childhood has such an inclusive approach.

EXEMPLIFYING ACHIEVEMENT OF LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

A Ministry of Education definition of assessment is 'the practice of observing children's learning (noticing), seeking to understand it (recognising), and acting on this understanding (responding)' (Ministry of Education, 2004e). Critical to enacting this for learners with special education needs would be the answers to the following two questions: "What is the learning?" and, from the learner, "Do you know me?"

In New Zealand, classes are commonly age-grouped and teachers are expected to accommodate several different levels of learning within their class programme planning. The *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* support learner-centred practice in respect that the resources assist teachers to find and focus on the level at which a learner is achieving rather than age or grade level expectations.

The *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* do, however, indicate "typical" developmental progression through their level structure. The draft *New Zealand Curriculum* (2006b) includes a model which illustrates that the match between the eight levels of achievement and 13 class levels may vary markedly for individual students (p. 34). For example, the model shows that Level One of the curriculum may be the most appropriate level for learners in Years 1 through to early Year 6; the reality is that there are some students that will be working on Level One of the curriculum for all of their primary and secondary schooling. *The New Zealand Curriculum* assumes that Level One is an appropriate starting point for most learners, although in reality, some children aged 3 and 4 are capable of achievement beyond Level Two of the curriculum; for some students closer to age 21 the specific goals within Level One may still be difficult. Despite Ministry of Education provision of special education support, some teachers and specialists question the relevance of *The New Zealand Curriculum* for learners with the most profound cognitive disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2005). There are no *New Zealand Curriculum* exemplars that showcase the learning and achievement of students who cannot read, walk, talk or grasp a pencil.

A cluster group of New Zealand schools have developed and produced exemplars for oral, written and visual language that showcase "pathways within level one" (Central Region Special Schools, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). These exemplars are accompanied by matrices which detail learning progressions

at a micro level. Written English exemplars and guidelines for teachers of deaf students have also been recently published (Kelston Deaf Education Centre & van Asch Deaf Education Centre, 2006). The Ministry of Education is currently funding further development of curriculum exemplars for learners with special education needs.

Key competencies are aspects of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2006b) that may be less likely to have a levels focus. However, key competencies should be seen as part of the curriculum, and not a replacement for the learning areas. This is particularly important to remember for learners with special education needs; working on key competencies, such as managing self and relating to others, must not become an excuse for not planning such learning areas as the arts, technology and social studies. Rather, 'the learning areas provide a structure and suggest contexts in which these competencies can be developed, using appropriate pedagogy' (Ministry of Education, 2006b, p. 1). Teachers have the responsibility of finding and using this "appropriate pedagogy"; what works best for their community of learners.

The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, has no achievement related dilemma because '*Te Whāriki* is designed to be inclusive and appropriate for all children and anticipates that special learning needs will be met as children learn together in all kinds of early childhood settings' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 2). *Te Whāriki* states that 'the needs of the children, not assessment procedures, should determine the curriculum' (p. 29). Key aspects of curriculum assessment in early childhood education include emphasis on practices that support children as competent learners, a holistic view of learning, and acknowledgement of reciprocal relationships between children, adults including parents, and the learning environment (Williamson, Cullen & Lepper, 2006).

The early childhood exemplars, *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004e), include a diverse range of children's abilities and learning throughout the resource, and in a booklet dedicated to inclusive practice. A narrative assessment learning story approach is used throughout the early childhood exemplars; learning stories are 'a form of documented and structured observations that take a story and a credit approach' (Ministry of Education, 2001, cited in Molloy, 2005). The learning stories of Jace imitating and making facial expressions and sounds (Ministry of Education, 2004e, booklet 1, p. 11) and of Kian noticing the sound his foot makes on a resonance board (booklet 9, p. 22) showcase that assessment for this sector is sociocultural. The emphasis is on learning in the context of environment and interactions, and not reliant on the production of products.

Blaiklock (2006) critiques the level of rigour, verification and objectivity within learning stories, describing them as exercises in "creative writing".

In early childhood, there has been strong resistance to developmental approaches in recent years (Williamson, 2004), as this approach 'ignored culture, community contexts, shared interests and the importance of peer- and adult-mediated learning' (Williamson, et al., 2006, p. 21). Williamson, Cullen and Lepper (2006) investigated the

assessment of teams of families, early childhood teachers, early intervention teachers, speech language therapists, hospital therapists and paraprofessionals. They found that the learning story approach (Carr, 2001), was able to integrate skill based and strength based models of assessment. The learning stories 'included the richness of the multiple perspectives inherent in the team. The lens for assessment was broadened and the focus shifted to include the child's strengths, the holistic view of the child and the teaching and learning context' (Williamson, et al., 2006, p. 28).

DISCUSSION

Consideration of the existing exemplar projects is a vital aspect of new exemplar development work, including exemplars for learners with special education needs. Some key considerations should include reflection and reflexivity. Such reflection would mean 'looking beyond the taken-for-granted ways of doing things and exploring alternatives for practice' (Ministry of Education, 2006c p. 7). Reflexivity requires 'the act of suspending judgments by accepting the fact that there are many ways of knowing and coming to know' (p. 7). Applying reflection and reflexivity to the following questions would begin some truly interesting discussion that would enhance any exemplar project initiatives.

- Despite *The New Zealand Curriculum* being for all learners, there are still discourses of learners who are "pre-curriculum". How can we more effectively illustrate that the learning of all school students is covered within the curriculum, and that all students can learn and achieve?
- Despite the philosophical belief in inclusion, to what extent does education in New Zealand really include those with special learning needs? For example, how is it possible that curriculum documents, assessment tools and exemplars can have been developed without examples of learners with significant levels of disability being automatically included, and instead with an assumption that most students will fall into a normative sample?
- In the Information Age (Wells, 2002), how important is it to identify next step progressions and predictive learning pathways? Does this limit possibilities for unique individual learning journeys? A curriculum-centred approach may be described as being learner-centred but the two concepts are in fact very different.
- Is there a danger with matrices that the micro-steps necessary to show learner progress could become infinitesimally small, and become a series of boxes that differ little in concept to checklists and labels? For the student who may spend 16 years on Level One of the curriculum, how does this approach support the teacher to know the individual learner as a person? Do matrices support "assessment for teaching" rather than "assessment for learning"?
- If a holistic learner-centred approach to learning is used in school settings, what support will teachers have to be able to plan for individuals, and how will assessment and reporting be manageable?

- Is it realistic to expect that all class programmes can be adapted for learners with significant long-term special education needs? If not, how does an individual programme manage to avoid being different and isolating for learners? How are functional skills integrated within regular class programmes?
- Is the purpose for assessment always clear and meaningful to teachers? When assessment clearly links to learning it is valued by teachers, but when entwined with practices, procedures, habit, reporting, accountability and record-keeping, learning may lose focus.
- How can exemplars manage to balance authenticity, reliability and validity – and are all these considerations of equal importance?
- It would be impossible to develop exemplars for all areas of the curriculum, for all ages, and across all types of disability. Therefore, how can we promote that the extent to which teachers can *transfer* approaches to assessment for their own students' learning contexts is critical?
- How do we ensure that the perspectives of family and whānau are included in school assessment practices, and are these even more critical for learners with special education needs?
- How can the barriers be broken down between early childhood and school sectors so that issues such as assessment can be considered with more depth and breadth? How can case studies that contribute to cross-sector connections (for example Carr & Peters, 2005) be shared with a wider audience?
- How do narratives and learning stories contribute to an assessment toolkit which includes a range of assessment tools and approaches?
- How might the use of Key Competencies in the *Draft Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2006a) influence ideas about assessment with particular reference to dispositions for learning (Carr, 2001; Carr & Claxton, 2002; Sadler, 2002) and teaching stories (Podmore, 2006)?

CONCLUSION

In the context of this discussion on assessment and exemplars, it is important that we continue to be both reflective and reflexive in order to ensure that we understand the rationale for our practices, and that these practices are inclusive of learners with diverse ability levels. We all have a responsibility to critically question whether our assessment approaches and beliefs are truly inclusive for all learners so that special education is conceptually included in projects and not retrospectively added on as something separate. In the ideal world, curriculum exemplars for learners with special education needs would not be constructed separately. This would also remove the focus on the label “special needs” and return the focus to where it belongs: learners and learning. Exemplars can best support assessment and teaching when their purpose goals are clear, when we critically question and reflect on our practices, and when we include all learners.

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