

Research Note

Gaps and contradictions in *Kei Tua o te Pae*: A critical discourse analysis

Abstract.

This paper describes one set of findings from an analysis of the three introductory booklets of Kei Tua o te Pae- the early childhood assessment exemplars. A critical discourse study perspective was taken in the analysis, which aimed to uncover gaps and contradictions that may have created a barrier to the effective implementation of the resource. Questions based on Gee's (2011) inquiry tools were used as lenses for close reading of the booklets from Kei Tua o te Pae and three of these questions are described here, as are the findings from that part of the research.

The Research.

Kei Tua o te Pae (Ministry of Education, 2004; 2007; 2009) is a resource designed to support professional discussion and learning about early childhood assessment in New Zealand. This resource of 20 booklets was distributed free of charge to early childhood education (ECE) services and Primary schools between 2005 and 2009 in three sets. Along with the physical resource, the Ministry of Education (MOE) funded professional development programmes nationwide through three contracts.

I was a facilitator and later national co-director of one of these contracts, the Combined Universities, which was made up of teams from six teacher education providers across New Zealand (NZ). During our five years of work it became increasingly clear to me that there were gaps in the information presented in *Kei Tua o te Pae*. These gaps were likely to prevent truly informed discussion and, along with ongoing challenges in the sector, such as a lack of qualified teachers, may have encouraged a surface level interpretation of preferred assessment practices, in direct contrast to the stated intention of the authors.

The sample selection and method.

The size of the resource was problematic and so I selected as my sample the three introductory books of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, Books 1, 10 and 16 (MOE, 2004; 2007; 2009), making an assumption that they contained a summary of the key ideas for each set of books in the resource. I drew on a critical discourse studies (CDS) perspective based mostly on the work of Van Dijk (2006), Gee (2011) and Saarinen (2008).

A CDS approach to text analysis considers relationships between linguistic features of texts as well as the social, historical and political contexts of both the writers and the audience for a text (Taylor, 2004; van Dijk, 1997). CDS also includes an assumption that the research outcomes will create social change by making room for alternative viewpoints (van Dijk, 1997).

I used six questions as inquiry tools to gather data from my sample. These questions were based on a larger set of 27 questions developed originally by Gee (2011). For the purposes of this paper I focus on the results from three of the six questions, which related to one particular research question; “What ideas and practices have been silenced or back-grounded in *Kei Tua o te Pae*?. Each of the three introductory booklets was read in turn using each of the questions as a critical lens to guide my reading. The same information often came up for multiple questions and this was seen to strengthen the findings. I will first describe two of my inquiry tool questions that were used separately to gather data but for which the findings were similar.

What would seem strange to an outsider?

This tool was used to distance myself as much as possible from the resource I had worked with full time over five years, and make it seem less familiar. I tried to identify statements, ideas or gaps that might seem strange to someone who was involved in education but had not been involved in either developing or working with *Kei Tua o te Pae*.

Why this way and not that way? What was left out?

This question was used to theorise alternatives to ideas included in the sample texts and often went hand in hand with the first question. Some of this work relied on my experiences in professional development (PD) where both teachers and facilitators had struggled to understand the content of a booklet because of what they considered to be a lack of information. Other gaps were identified through comparisons to my literature review. The main findings of these two questions were that there was a lack of information in the sample about narrative assessment, about the use of photographs in assessment, and a lack of information about data-gathering for assessment purposes.

A narrative approach to assessment documentation.

All of the assessment documentation examples in the sample booklets followed a narrative format, and all but one contained photographs. “Learning stories” were not mentioned at all in Book 1 of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, and “narratives” only on the final page, although this book was intended to introduce the *Kei Tua o te Pae* resource as a whole. This seemed strange, especially given that there was also a lack of information in the general assessment literature about narrative assessment practices.

It is likely that the writers considered a narrative approach to be already well established in NZ ECE. Mitchell (2008) reported that learning stories were common practice in NZ ECE centres with 78% of teachers reporting that they used them in 2003, two years before the publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae*. On the other hand, it was clear from later research that many teachers did not have a good understanding of what constituted a quality narrative assessment or learning story (ERO, 2007; Stuart, Aitken, Gould, & Meade, 2008) and that such information would have been useful in the resource. During *Kei Tua o te Pae* PD meetings I found that the term “narrative” was also unfamiliar to most teachers even if they were using learning stories, and there was nothing in the resource to support facilitators in talking to teachers about narrative.

Teachers researching narrative theory as it is described in the literature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) may be confused about how it applies to ECE assessment. Others are likely to interpret “narrative” in the context of their own mental models of literature and story. From a literary perspective, narrative suggests a range of characteristics such as plot, theme, crisis and resolution that are also unlikely to be directly useful in assessment, and may even confuse teachers who are trying to integrate that perspective with assessment discourses. Without clearer guidance in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, teachers are disadvantaged as they try to develop their own quality approaches to assessment and may well take a surface level approach to understanding.

Using photographs in assessment documentation

There was also a lack of information in the sample about the use of photographs in assessment. This gap, coupled with the number of exemplars that contained photographs, suggested that the practice was common knowledge and did not need supporting information. My earlier research casts doubt on those assumptions (Perkins, 2010).

Photographs were used frequently in the introductory books of *Kei Tua o te Pae*. Seven of the eight assessment exemplars in the sample contained at least one and up to twelve photographs although there was no discussion about how photographs could or should be used in assessment documentation. Photographs were described as being useful in illustrating children’s progress or as a visual language but no details were given about the pedagogy of photography in assessment. Given that the use of photographs was reported by Mitchell (2008) as teachers’ most common method to gather data in 2003 and 2007, the level of uninformed and uncritical use of them is a matter for concern (Perkins, 2010) and was not addressed in the sample texts. Information about other methods of data gathering was even less visible.

A lack of information on data gathering.

Descriptions and critique of methods for data-gathering are visible throughout the assessment literature. Traditionally, data-gathering tools in ECE included observation, supported by artifacts such as samples of writing or artwork, information from families, and occasionally, some form of testing (Drummond, 2003; Gullo, 2005; Mitchell, 2008; Podmore, 2006). Observation tools included running records, event and time sampling, as well as diaries and anecdotal records, all of which were evident in the assessment literature, both in NZ and internationally. In contrast, data-gathering was not described at all in *Kei Tua o te Pae* and observation was barely mentioned, apparently replaced by the term “noticing” (MOE, 2004).

“Assessment for learning” was defined in Book 1 of *Kei Tua o te Pae* as “noticing, recognising and responding”. That phrase was linked to Drummond’s (1993) definition of assessment; “we [...] observe children’s learning [notice], strive to understand it [recognise], and then put our understanding to good use [respond]” (Book 1, p.6). Throughout the introductory booklets, the importance of teachers being able to recognise and respond effectively to learning was emphasised, but there was no discussion about “noticing” and what it could look like in practice. Books 1 and 10 rarely mentioned observation, and noticing was only addressed as a part of the complete process of noticing, recognising and responding, with the emphasis always being on the latter two phases of the process. Book 16 did not refer at any point to “noticing” alone, although it did mention the “noticing, recognising, responding” process in a definition of assessment and as formative assessment.

It would appear that there is a gap in *Kei Tua o te Pae* in relation to how information for assessment is gathered, which may be partly responsible for reports that teachers were failing to document children’s learning in narrative assessments (ERO, 2007; Stuart, et al., 2008). If the teachers are not informed about effective tools for gathering information on children’s learning (noticing), they are less likely to have useful information for analysis in the

“recognising” phase. This has serious implications for a sector still striving to be recognised as being of vital importance in the wider education framework, and where up to 50% of the adults working with children are allowed by regulation to be unqualified. One of the difficulties in is how the term “learning stories “ is defined.

One of the claims for learning stories was that they were a tool for both observation/data-gathering and assessment (Mitchell, 2008). Their inclusion in Hamer’s (2000) book on observation may have also implied this. This claim does not appear to have been contested. I contend that although learning stories may document children’s actions, language or behaviour, and provide a useful framework for analysing these, they are a documentation method, not a data-gathering method.

Informal observation and ‘noticing’ does not appear to be clearly described anywhere and may have very different meanings for different teachers. If the data gathered for assessment purposes is inaccurate or incomplete, based on a passing or momentary “noticing” of a child, it is logical to conclude that useful analysis is unlikely to follow. This is especially true in centres where the teachers do not have opportunities to share what they have noticed, who write up learning stories individually. Unqualified teachers are less likely to be able to analyse what they have noticed in the context of *Te Whariki* or learning theories. The literature indicated that midway through the implementation phase of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, half of the assessment documentation being created did not clearly describe children’s learning at all, did not inform planning and tended to be a simple narrative about a one-off experience for a child (ERO, 2007; Stuart et al., 2008).

What evidence is there of persuasion through omission?

Any guiding text from a government body such as the MOE could be considered to be persuasive. Added to that sense of authority in *Kei Tua o te Pae* is the status in ECE of the key authors and project co-directors Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee. Usually it is to be expected that such a document will attempt to persuade the readers by describing preferred practices. What is

often not evident is the powerful use that can also be made of persuasion through omission. By leaving out aspects of a discourse, it is possible to encourage readers to view as irrelevant, ideas and practices which are then likely to be discarded. Where only one perspective is described, participants in a discourse are likely to perceive it as valued and normalised (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosely, Hui & Joseph, 2005). By positioning one set of discourses as relevant and ignoring others, *Kei Tua o te Pae* reduced the information available to Participants and established certain preferred discourses as the norms for the ECE community of practice. “Not saying something - staying silent about – can be a way of privileging what you do say, since you leave unsaid information that might make the [...] reader think differently about your viewpoint” (Gee, 2011, p.142).

In addition to leaving out information about methods of data-gathering for assessment, summative assessment was also omitted entirely. The omission of summative assessment from the resource contrasted strongly with the research literature, most notably the seminal Black & Wiliam (1998) report, which although strongly supporting an increased focus on formative assessment, also emphasised the importance of teachers participating in both summative and formative assessment.

Without some information on both summative and formative purposes for assessment, it is difficult to see how teachers can avoid the trap of assessment that is serially summative rather than truly informing teaching. ERO (2008) has critiqued the lack of evidence in centres that assessment information is being used formatively, showing a lack of understanding among teachers of this concept.

Conclusion.

Although there were many clear benefits from the introduction of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Mitchell, 2008; Stuart et al., 2008), it was also possible that some of the weaknesses identified in assessment documentation since the dissemination of that resource may be related to the gaps identified in my research.

Although *Kei Tua o te Pae* was intended to inform professional discussions

about assessment, much of the information required for a practical application of those discussions was absent and relied on additional information gathered by individual teachers and PD facilitators.

In contrast to the assessment literature, the introductory books of *Kei Tua o te Pae* did not include information about data-gathering or summative assessment. They also failed to provide practical, pedagogical information about narrative and photographic approaches to assessment documentation, in spite of those being demonstrated as the preferred discourses.

Future research will include an analysis of the other 17 books of the resource to check that the findings are generalisable across the resource as a whole. In addition it would be interesting to investigate how a number of centres are implementing assessment currently, especially those with high numbers of unqualified staff.

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