

Assessment is coming and the early childhood sector must lead the way

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Abstract

Assessment is a core component of quality early childhood practice. It is explicitly highlighted in the new Early Years Learning Framework V2.0 and is a standard within Quality Area 1 of the National Quality Standard. In everyday early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, and in initial teacher education, assessment is often limited to observational and narrative-driven approaches. Recent reviews of the literature highlight that there are few other assessment tools readily available to educators. What assessment looks like in early childhood is changing. The Commonwealth, as part of the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement, is developing, trialling, and implementing a preschool outcomes measure. The jurisdictions, too, are driving change: the Victorian Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool is an assessment designed to make consistent observations and assessments of children's learning in preschool settings. The current state of assessment practices in early childhood settings, and the coming reforms, are provoking a debate about the purpose of assessment and the time invested in conducting assessment. Typically, distinctions are made between formative and summative assessments, as well as population measurement or reporting. Different tools are used for each – educators may imagine soon writing learning stories, completing a transition statement, and undertaking a new preschool outcome assessment for each child in their preschool setting. This paper highlights the latest trends and research in assessment in the early years and discusses a new model of assessment that is embedded in a cycle of practice that includes:

- using assessment to locate students on a measure
- using learning progressions that are aligned with measures to understand what learning looks like, and what typically comes next, and to understand that learning is independent of the education system – no matter whether children are in long daycare, preschool or school settings

- using learning progressions to design and implement interactions, to select pedagogical strategies and curriculum materials that are evidence-informed and aligned at different levels of learning
- compiling evidence of growth (or lack of) using assessment or observation, and updating planning and practice
- facilitating professional discussions across transitions to support continuity of learning, and using assessments that are calibrated on a common scale, so that learning is visible from the first years of life, until the end of primary school and beyond.

This framework for assessment is one that educators and the sector must lead themselves. The sector can lead change to end the unhelpful stratification of assessment types and tools. Instead, we must develop excellent quality measures that have cutting-edge technical rigour, along with authentic administration embedded in familiar interactions and experience. By putting such assessments in the hands of educators, it is possible to develop a common understanding of what learning looks like from the early emergence of skills and abilities through to the development of more advanced skills. Importantly, such measures must be embedded in practice – supporting educators to plan and to intervene. From such assessments, we can develop new ways to translate between assessments, decoupling the specific tool chosen from knowledge about learning domains, and to aggregate-up findings to the community and population level, removing the burden of multiple, separate assessments to deliver on the needs of external stakeholders.