

Playing the assessment game: an English early childhood education perspective

Jo Basford & Caroline Bath

To cite this article: Jo Basford & Caroline Bath (2014) Playing the assessment game: an English early childhood education perspective, *Early Years*, 34:2, 119-132, DOI: [10.1080/09575146.2014.903386](https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.903386)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.903386>



Published online: 24 Apr 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3929



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 10 View citing articles [↗](#)

Playing the assessment game: an English early childhood education perspective

Jo Basford^a and Caroline Bath^{b*}

^a*Faculty of Education, Early Years and Childhood Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK;* ^b*Education and Early Childhood Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK*

(Received 9 November 2013; accepted 7 March 2014)

Assessment and the documentation of learning is an international issue in early childhood education (ECE) and has increasingly become a way for governments to exercise direct control over the practitioners working with young children. This paper details recent statutory guidance about assessment and documentation for English ECE settings and deconstructs the latest English ECE policies, highlighting that these often give contradictory messages to practitioners. It suggests that practitioners are caught up in playing a game: trying to make compatible assessment practices that address both the scientific discourse of empiricism and a more recent internationally influenced sociocultural discourse, as outlined by Soler and Miller. However, we concede that it is unrealistic to reproduce practices that have deeply culturally embedded significance elsewhere. The paper therefore outlines key challenges for English practitioners: how to use documentation as a generative assessment tool and how to make assessment more collaborative. We suggest that addressing these issues through building pedagogical knowledge could enable practitioners to develop greater confidence when playing the assessment game.

Keywords: assessment; documentation; pedagogy; early years; England

Introduction

Assessment and its relationship with concepts of documentation in early childhood education (ECE) is currently a key international issue. Whilst many national early years curricula attempt to walk the line between recognition of notions of child development, children's agency and what children need to learn for their future educational attainment, research often suggests tensions surrounding the multiple assessment demands on children and practitioners. For example, research in Australia found increased friction between the roles of the educator and the child as learner when the curriculum was tied to a notion of intentionality and this, in turn, was exacerbated by educators' misunderstanding of their role in the learning process (Leggett and Ford 2013). Similarly, an example of documenting children's learning in Iceland suggested that practitioners were prone to let their pre-judgements of children's ability interfere with the assessment process (Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir 2010); and in a UK context, a statutory curriculum was noted to skew practitioners' ability to observe children in an open-ended manner (Daniels 2012). Added to these

*Corresponding author. Email: c.m.bath@ljmu.ac.uk

potential barriers to assessment, there are very few international examples of children successfully contributing to their own assessments through the production of documentation, except where pedagogical approaches eschew notions of predetermined curricula, most notably in the Reggio Emilia preschools (Rinaldi 2005). Therefore, the challenge of involving young children as agents or indeed even *subjects* in assessment and documentation processes is beset by frameworks that are tied to learning outcomes which make it difficult to recognise that children are individual and potentially idiosyncratic learners.

This paper takes one national UK context, England, and attempts to trace the connections between assessment and processes of documentation, whilst also deconstructing the aforesaid tensions between curriculum-led and, what we can broadly describe as, child-led practices in which children are viewed as shaping or even actively contributing to the assessment process. Internationally, the documentation of early learning has been described variously by Carr (2001) as part of an assessment process involving a narrative account of learning and by Rinaldi (2005) as part of an approach to pedagogy to make learning visible. In England, however, ideas of documenting early learning have been strongly influenced by broader national curriculum developments in primary and secondary education which have defined assessment 'of', 'as' and 'for' learning. One of the key recommendations of an evaluation of the 2009 initiative *Assessing pupil's progress* was to 'be clear that the purpose of assessment is to improve achievement not just measure attainment, and develop systematically the teaching and learning skills that drive pupil's progress in lessons' (Ofsted 2011, 6). This reinforced an approach to assessment *for* learning which was driven by the Assessment Reform Group set up in 2006 and influenced by an important study of assessment, *Inside the Black Box* (Black and Wiliam 1998). This study made a strong case that improving teacher's skills as formative assessors would enhance overall practice.

From an ECE perspective, effective implementation of assessment *for* learning is particularly concerned with the practitioner supporting children in developing their metacognitive processes that make them aware of how they are learning (Blandford and Knowles 2012, 488). Broadhead (2006) has suggested that practitioners need to develop observations of children to inform their own interaction with them and stimulate children's thinking, rather than using observation as a tool to fulfil summative assessment requirements as set against a curriculum. Thus, in all sectors, there has been a clear movement in the last 10 years towards assessment *for* learning in English education. However, this has replicated rather than avoided the tensions discussed earlier between the expectation of assessing set curriculum outcomes and assessment and documentation as a formative process.

We use the analogy of a game for the focus of this paper. This is to emphasise the conflicting nature of the demands on practitioners which, we suggest, forces them to undertake strategic rather than authentic manoeuvres in order to satisfy those demands. In the same way, we contend that early years practitioners in England are charged with finding ways of mediating and implementing policy expectations that seem to advocate two competing purposes for the 'game' of assessment. One is concerned with the assessment of children against a measurable set of outcomes at a set point in time to assure readiness for the next stage of their education. The other implies that assessment is a collaborative process, in which children's learning and development is documented as an ongoing learning journey that is reflective of the culture and practice of the community the setting serves.

The English context

In the English ECE context, the requirement to assess and monitor young children's progress became a key expectation with the inception of the Desirable Learning Outcomes (DfEE/SCAA 1996). Since then, the format of assessment has taken on a number of guises and 'goals', but arguably what is more significant is that assessment expectations in ECE have been a key policy lever for successive UK governments to bring people, organisations and objectives into alignment. In policy terms, Ozga (2008, 262) configures this phenomenon 'a regulatory mechanism'. Regulation continues to dominate; in 2012, a revised curriculum framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) outlined practice and welfare requirements for all settings responsible for the care and education of children from birth to six-years old (DfE 2012). A subsequent EYFS 'profile' (STA 2013) outlined assessment and recording requirements that consist of two key elements:

The attainment of each child assessed in relation to the 17 Early Learning Goal (ELG) descriptors, together with a short narrative describing the child's three learning characteristics. (STA 2013, 5)

This means that the profile should provide evidence about children's attainment against a set of predetermined goals alongside an account of a young learner's attitude and dispositions to learning. This in turn means that practitioners are now expected to adopt what Wood (2007) refers to as an 'integrated' pedagogical approach that implies the application of both positivist and interpretative assessment strategies. It is notable that the directive to gain such an account reflects, in part, the influence that international pedagogical approaches have had on early years policy and practice in England. These include the Te Whāriki curriculum in New Zealand (Carr 2001) and the Reggio Emilia preschools (Rinaldi 2005), which demonstrate models of assessment and recording which frame assessment as an iterative approach to the documentation of children's learning.

However, the picture has become even more complicated in recent months as the latest government advice to English practitioners (DfE 2013a, 2013b) states that there are only two statutory assessment requirements, namely a progress check at the age of two and the EYFS profile at the end of the first year of statutory schooling, commonly known as the 'reception year'. The requirement to complete a narrative account of children's learning is stated to be a 'misconception' (DfE 2013a, 42). Added to this, a consultation on a new set of proposals for assessment and accountability procedures in the primary phase has also been launched. The proposals signal a return to:

a baseline check early in reception [which] would allow the crucial progress made in reception, year 1 and year 2 to be reflected in the accountability system and would reinforce the importance of early intervention. The EYFS would remain in place but, to avoid increasing the assessment burden, we could make the EYFS Profile non-statutory. (DfE 2013c, 5)

This suggests that the discourse associated with assessment is now even more strongly framed within a regime of accountability, measurement and readiness in which the ECE sector becomes an intervention in itself that can improve performance in the compulsory school phase (Moss 2013, 5). Thus the 'integrated' pedagogical approach (Wood 2007) becomes even harder to achieve.

In the light of such advice, this paper contends that practitioners are split between competing and dissonant demands, to the extent that assessment practices in English early childhood settings have become contradictory unless the practitioner can exercise a high degree of professional autonomy and understanding which may challenge aspects of the statutory guidance (DfE 2013a, 2013b). Osgood's research (Osgood 2006a, 2006b) has been particularly vocal in highlighting the limited opportunities practitioners in England have to exercise their own professional values and beliefs regarding curriculum and policy. Both Urban (2008) and Moss (2013) echo such concerns and note how members of the ECE community are rarely listened to authentically during policy formation, and are at the bottom of the 'epistemological hierarchy' Moss (2013, 141) when research is conducted. Such power-based discourses suggest that the ECE practitioner has very limited opportunity to exercise their own values and beliefs and resist regulation and policy.

From a vantage point of such powerlessness, the dilemma of attending to conflicting messages about assessment is heightened for practitioners. This gives us the analogy for this paper which also echoes Bourdieu's seminal work (1984), likening a field of practice to a metaphorical game. To further extend the metaphor, we can hope that knowing the rules of 'the game' and how it is played enables the player to create useful opportunities for him or herself (Bourdieu 1984). Taking this position enables us to explore the significance for both the learner and the practitioner of attempting to mediate policy expectations whilst ensuring that learning experiences are both representative of a child's social, cultural and historical heritage, and sense of competence. In order to interrogate these apparently contradictory demands, this paper will explore three broad themes:

- The current ECE assessment landscape in England.
- An illustration of our argument regarding the 'assessment game' by examining competing assessment paradigms.
- The resulting challenges for practice in an English context.

The current ECE assessment landscape in England

An analysis of the evolution of the English early years curriculum shows the impact of both policy and research. In particular, research studies such as *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (Siraj Blatchford et al. 2003) and *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (Siraj Blatchford et al. 2002) have been influential in leading to a shift towards a sociocultural perspective of learning (Fleer 2002). However, assessment practice has sometimes lagged behind this conceptual change and has remained situated in a Piagetian framework, or at least a 'social influence approach' (Fleer 2002, 106). The notion of a social influence is particularly pertinent when considering the common practice of observing children in playful situations to provide evidence of children's learning interests and capabilities, as such observations tend to note learning on an individualistic basis. Practitioners have therefore been faced with the demanding task of reworking or blending theories (Grieshaber 2008) or, as we have chosen to call it, playing an 'assessment game', in which they are required to choose the appropriate strategies that fit the learning context (Wood 2007).

It is also important to note that the current coalition government discourse on readiness to learn, as cited above, suggests that reforms to education policy have led to a practice that demands ‘technical rationality’ at the expense of teacher autonomy and ‘humanism in education’ (Plum 2012, 491). Such instrumental views of the curriculum have placed considerable emphasis on it being seen as a vehicle for creating citizens who will benefit society (Soler and Miller 2003, 58). This is seen as a necessary condition for sustaining knowledge economies to ensure that a future workforce is fit for purpose to meet the demands of globalisation (Moss 2013).

Herein lies the dilemma for ECE practitioners: to achieve one goal of the assessment game, they must follow regulations and be technically rational in their practice. They turn to ‘products’ (Drummond 2012, 77) as evidence of teaching and learning in the hope that this will provide sufficient evidence to satisfy those who govern them. Alongside this, they have a duty to ensure children are ‘ready’ for the next steps in their educational career. They also need to be conscious of the potential damage of the ‘toxic ideology’ (House 2012), of an age, stage and measurement mind set. This leads to the other goal of the game; competing with the drive for conformity and measurement. This is the goal that is concerned with attitude and disposition towards learning; that takes a more internationally aware and democratic approach to the learning process, using a ‘relational pedagogy’ (Papatheodorou 2009, 4).

From the practitioner viewpoint, this dilemma can be seen not only as a binary split between conformity and relational approaches but also as a split between conformity and subversion. To what extent *can* ECE practitioners play the game, providing children with the experience they need to develop as competent and confident learners, whilst still satisfying key stakeholders in providing evidence of measures that demonstrate conformity and accountability? The next section presents the depth and breadth of the pressures to conform that practitioners are faced with.

Competing assessment paradigms

The magnetic pull towards a positivist approach

The current English EYFS profile characterises children by ‘expected’ learning behaviours and capabilities along a developmental continuum. The assessment requirements demand that for each Early Learning Goal:

... practitioners must judge whether a child is meeting the level of development expected at the end of the Reception Year (expected), exceeding this level (exceeding), or not yet reaching this level (emerging). (STA 2013, 5)

This approach typifies conformity to the scientific discourse of empiricism and positivism that has been present in both teacher education and practice in education for some time (Popkewitz 1985). This is articulated through a distinct privileging of developmental psychology approaches and is manifested in practice through the measurement of achievement which sits with the notion of a universal or ‘typical’ child (Rogoff 2003; Burman 2008; Grieshaber 2008). However, the idea of making judgements to determine whether a child’s development is either ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ immediately produces their opposites (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001). Such judgements also provide the means for classifying and identifying the ‘abnormal’ child which not only enables the articulation of a deficit view, but also serves as a

justification for creating policies to address such deficiencies (Moss, Dillon, and Statham 2000, 240). This notion of standardisation leads to what Popkewitz (1985) referred to as ‘rituals of differentiation and homogeneity’ (103). In assessment terms, the ritual of observing children in order to match their behaviours to predetermined stages seems to be characteristic of this type of practice.

Grieshaber (2008, 508) warns that aspects of Piaget’s developmental theory (for example, stage theory) have become ‘weapons of mass seduction’ in ECE practice. It is, therefore, important to realise that a so-called child-centred approach (as distinct from child-led) is also aligned with a developmental approach to learning concerned with self-realisation, autonomy and individual growth (MacNaughton 2003). Burman (2008, 266) also makes the important point that practices which focus on the individual becoming an independent and autonomous learner ‘perpetuate[s] rather than challenge[s] social inequalities’ (266). To further trouble the idea of child centredness, Baker (1998, 151) says: ‘it is important to question what the centering of the child decenters’. In relation to assessment practice, it could therefore be argued that developmental assessment judgements do not value the power of a collaborative approach to learning. For example, ECE practitioners are urged to observe children, in order to:

... understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles, and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations. (DfE 2012, 10)

This reveals a discourse of individualisation which implies that the child is autonomous, isolated and decontextualised from his/her peers and community (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2006) and makes no mention of learning and development within the context of relationships with peers.

Grieshaber (2008) goes as far as to argue that the adoption of a developmental approach to learning locates development first and learning second. Practitioners are required to position a child along a developmental continuum which then determines the success in which a child has met the ‘expected’ level to achieve the desired goal. The danger of adopting this approach is that adults will look for what they expect to see, at the expense of picking up on the glimpses of children’s unintentional learning (Drummond 2012). A similar hazard is that of ‘watching and waiting’ to record significant moments that can be recorded (Wood and Attfield 2005). Katz (1999) suggests these types of practices reveal that practitioners often misinterpret relevant theory and adopt a literal approach. In an English context, this could mean that the pull of Early Learning Goals steers some practitioners away from intervention they view as interference to gaining more ‘authentic’ information of a child’s innate capability.

The next section of this paper looks at another competing goal of the assessment game – subversion – as an alternative approach to assessment practice. This approach looks more deeply at the significance of intervention and collaboration as interpretations of the observation process.

The desire for a sociocultural approach

A sociocultural approach to learning, as outlined by Soler and Miller (2003), gives a greater focus on the context of learning which is most likely to show evidence of *potential* development. Whilst this approach, like the positivist approach discussed

in the last section, is also implicitly developmental, it does, nevertheless, allow for co-construction of children's development in which children and parents are partners in the process. This is best summed up by Prout and James (1997) who state that 'the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture'. Thus, from a sociocultural perspective, assessment is embedded into learning as a cultural tool to help children build their ideas and capacities, rather than just to assess what has been learnt at one particular moment (McLachlan, Fleer, and Edwards 2010, 133). Fleer (2002) argues that such an approach removes focus on a deficit model of assessment and provides insight into a child's learning characteristics. A shift to a more sociocultural view of learning is exemplified in *Development Matters* (Early Education 2012), a document aligned to the EYFS (DfE 2012), which frames learning characteristics in the following way:

The ways in which the child engages with other people and their environment – playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically – underpin learning and development across all areas and support the child to remain an effective and motivated learner. (4)

The ethos behind the learning characteristics exemplified in *Development Matters* (Early Education 2012) relates strongly to the work on learning dispositions (Carr 2001) that foreground assessment practice within the Te Whāriki curriculum in New Zealand, as cited above. This curriculum has a consultative approach (Soler and Miller 2003), which implies that learning goals are mediated between the child and adult, rather than decided on solely by the adult. Although there are some commonalities with the EYFS (DfE 2012), as both approaches outline values and goals for the curriculum, the Te Whāriki approach is more concerned with the *process* by which children meet the desired goals (Ritchie and Buzzelli 2012). Carr's (2001) three domains of dispositions, being 'ready, willing and able' to learn are replicated in the *Development Matters* documentation, and require the practitioner to describe how children are engaged, motivated and thinking during their learning experiences.

Carr's (2001) own position on assessment from a sociocultural perspective is focused on an interest and involvement system. She assumes a focus on 'learning in action' rather than the individual alone (49). The significance of the term 'action' here is related to how the 'action' of mediating cultural tools and language can generate both interest and involvement in a learning situation within a social community. Thus the sociocultural approach to assessment becomes one of narrative accounts of children's learning. This explains, rather than displays, learning (Forman and Fyfe 1998) and is done through the practices of observing, recording, interpreting and sharing the learning process in order to deepen and extend the learning experience (Suárez 2006). Bath (2012) also claims that children's involvement should be seen as fundamental to documentation which is viewed as part of a formative rather than summative learning process.

The approach to assessment in the Reggio Emilia preschools is another curriculum model which sits at the far end of a sociocultural continuum, due to its localised and individualised pedagogy (Soler and Miller 2003). It is important to note that the Reggio Emilia experience is neither a method nor prescribed curriculum but more of a social and culturally embedded philosophical approach or 'phenomenon' (Stremmel 2012, 134). The use of pedagogical documentation is used to make

children's learning processes visible. But more importantly, it is based on the premise that no one person can verify knowledge about a child's learning, rather that it has to be negotiated between all parties – including the child and family (Forman and Fyfe 1998; Lazzari and Balduzzi 2013). Therefore, the significance of the documentation is that it has a specific function. It is a vehicle for the child as well as the practitioners to communicate their understanding of a learning situation to others.

The desire to replicate the 'Reggio' approach in other cultural contexts is well documented and also critiqued as 'cargo-cultism' (Johnson 1999). Nevertheless, the notion of documenting learning is still an element of assessment practice that practitioners seek to emulate (Moyle and Papatheodorou 2012). However, to be successful, documentation from a sociocultural standpoint requires a high level of adult and child communicative cooperation to challenge and deconstruct existing knowledge structures (Bath 2012). By considering assessment as a combative game, we argue that English practitioners find themselves trying to make learning a more collaborative endeavour whilst being under increasing pressure to provide 'evidence' of learning at a set point in time and that such competing demands pull them in contradictory directions.

Challenges for practice in an English context

As we have seen, assessment practice in England can be located within two competing paradigms. Although based on pre-set goals characterised by endless observations, tests and assessments (Taguchi 2010), international influences on the English ECE curriculum and some statutory guidance ask practitioners to adopt a more reflective approach and 'responsible pedagogy' (STA 2013). Here, we argue that this dichotomy can only be bridged by high-quality adult interaction that is both sensitive and adaptive to the needs of individual children.

When assessment is concerned with normative evaluation and benchmarking, there is a risk that opportunities for children to develop the desired learning characteristics such as resilience, reciprocity and playfulness may be adversely affected (Carr and Claxton 2002, 18) and be misunderstood by some practitioners as interference – rather than responsible intervention. Broadhead (2006) also suggests that there is a danger that practitioners, if relying on an ages and stages view of development, may underestimate children's ability to think in ways that are both more complex and original than expected. She argues that not only does this have implications for silencing the child's voice, but also critical moments related to praxis that would allow the teacher to reflect on her own practice are lost. Likewise, Moss, Dillon, and Statham (2000, 238) suggest that a climate of regulation and measurement is particularly unfavourable to 'the type of critical thinking that brings self-awareness'.

It is this climate of regulation, measurement and uniformity within ECE policy (as articulated by Moss, Dillon, and Statham 2000; Osgood 2006a), alongside a pre-occupation with school readiness (Whitebread and Bingham 2011; House 2012), that has led to practitioners becoming technicians (Moss 2006), and ECE settings 'sites for technical practice, seeking the best methods and procedures to delivering predetermined outcomes' (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 2). Added to this debate is the assumption which both Moss (2006, 2013) and Biesta (2009) argue, that such a culture of performativity means that targets and indicators of quality are mistakenly assumed as indicators of 'good quality' and 'effective practice'. A good-quality

setting is then one that can demonstrate children have made sufficient progress to be 'ready' for school and provide 'baseline' evidence that will be useful at the start of school. This type of evidence is consequently bound within measurable statements, rather than narrative descriptions that are open to interpretation.

In contrast to this emphasis on normative measurement, the notion of critical thinking and self-awareness which Broadhead (2006) highlights is particularly prominent in the previously cited Reggio Emilia approach. Whilst some settings in England (see for example, *Sightlines Initiative* 2010) attempt to replicate the Reggio approach through providing rich aesthetic experiences and documentation of children's work, it is a way of thinking which is unfamiliar to most teachers outside the confines of the Italian municipalities (Stremmel 2012). So, perhaps being able to play the assessment game requires practitioners to be able to think beyond technical and managerial discourses of assessment. Although the most recent assessment requirements have seen a reduction in the number of early learning goals that have to be assessed (Tickell 2011), the focus on the child or outcome as an orientating goal gives less attention to the complex process of teaching (Graue 2008). Fler (2002) suggests that documentation should include what teachers think and do, thus shifting beyond a focus on just the child to a more analytical focus on the whole learning process from a range of different perspectives.

Therefore, we argue that being an *expert* in the context of ECE means that the practitioner has the knowledge, skills and understanding to generate a pedagogy which involves learning processes and thinking, rather than that of profiling and outcomes (Papatheodorou 2009). This is what Drummond (2012) refers to as 'self-knowledge', in which practitioners' work includes a study of themselves and their understanding of the frameworks within which they understand children. Research by Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir (2010) and Buldu (2010) supports the idea that insight into children's learning dispositions is dependent on both practitioners' confidence in giving over some power during learning situations and also understanding the underpinning theory in relation to sociocultural theory and participation.

A responsible and relational pedagogy related to assessment practice is also concerned with using documentation with parents in an authentic manner. Nuttall (2003) and Duhn (2006) both acknowledge in their research that the success of the Te Whāriki approach was dependent on practitioner understanding of sociocultural theory. The teachers who were less effective tended to retain power and control over the learning and documentation process and this was particularly significant when working with parents. Sisson's research (2009) on using a Reggio approach towards assessment in the USA mirrored similar issues. Her research highlighted how practitioners tended to use documentation with parents as an 'accountability measure' rather than as a 'tool' (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2006, 356) for creating space for reflective and democratic discussion between child, teacher and family. Such references to practice highlight the tensions between necessities to conform to regulatory expectations whilst still attempting an approach which sits more closely with a democratic pedagogy.

Reflecting on these research findings within the international ECE field draws us to problematise issues specific to the English ECE context. What seems to be apparent here is that the practice of documenting observations and learning journeys can sometimes be a superficial and misunderstood process. Despite aspects of fascination, the attempt to transplant or borrow such culturally embedded practices as Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki into a different context that privileges universal norms of

development is not going to provide straightforward solutions to playing the ‘assessment game’ (Johnson 1999). Pedagogical documentation is not the same as child observation and whereas child observation is more concerned with the discourse of psychological development, pedagogical documentation is mainly about trying to understand what a child is capable of without any predetermined frameworks, expectations or norms (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2006).

Ironically, in England, the process of documentation is liable to become a vehicle for ‘making practice visible’ to administrators, politicians and parents, rather than practitioners or, indeed, children (Plum 2012, 496). Parents are here positioned apart from their children, as both subjects and objects of policy. It also appears that practitioners have lost confidence in their own ability due to an increasing reliance on official frameworks defining what counts as ‘quality’ (Cottle and Alexander 2012). This supports the view that despite the desire to passively resist such reforms, practitioners feel powerless to actively resist misinformed interpretations of policy expectations (Osgood 2006a).

A second issue is concerned with more a pragmatic stance. The requirement to track development against official early learning goals, as well as to provide qualitative statements regarding children’s learning characteristics, is time consuming. Thus, many local authorities are producing bespoke schedules and formats for documenting learning (see, e.g. Gloucestershire CC 2013; Surrey CC 2013). Settings are encouraged to use these frameworks as affirmation of effective practice and they often allow for the documentation of both ‘evidence’ of learning in relation to the ELGs and commentary regarding learning characteristics. Such practices could be considered as shaping desirable behaviour (Moss, Dillon, and Statham 2000, 236), but may also be seen as a commendable attempt to reduce the amount of bureaucratic paperwork for practitioners. However, they may actually lead to reinforcement of a superficial record of a child’s play at one particular moment in time, rather than intervention related to co-construction or participation in the learning process. Thus, the game of documentation remains divided and trapped by competing demands.

Conclusion

What we have explored in this paper is the significance for both the learner and the practitioner in attempting to mediate policy expectations whilst still endeavouring to ensure the learning experiences provided represent a child’s social, cultural and historical heritage and sense of competence. Prescriptive policy directives can be seen both as part of Ozga’s (2008) ‘regulatory mechanism’ and Osgood’s (2006a) ‘regulatory gaze’ but what we have become increasingly interested in is whether it is possible to apply a conforming/subverting binary to practice that can nevertheless still be transformative in the hands of practitioners.

Grieshaber (2008, 514) suggests that early childhood educators need to pursue some ‘theoretical rule bending, breaking, and making’ in order to challenge dominant traditions of early childhood pedagogy. We find resonance also in Osgood’s (2006a) view that acknowledges that although the regulatory gaze cannot be entirely resisted, it can at least be negotiated or challenged. However, to negotiate or challenge requires confidence, knowledge and understanding of effective pedagogy. Nutbrown’s (2012) recent review of ECE workforce qualifications highlighted the importance of practitioners knowing how to apply pedagogical theory and knowledge to their practice. With knowledge comes power and if practitioners are

sufficiently knowledgeable, they will potentially have greater power and confidence in playing the assessment game: a game that allows them to perform the technical duties to satisfy the gatekeepers of regulation whilst also satisfying their own moral and ethical duties to encourage children and their families to participate in learning which is representative of their social, cultural and historical heritage.

References

- Baker, B. 1998. "‘Childhood’ in the Emergence and Spread of US Public Schools." In *Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge and Power in Education*, edited by T. Popkewitz and M. Brennan, 117–143. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Bath, C. 2012. "‘I Can't Read It; I Don't Know’: Young Children's Participation in the Pedagogical Documentation of English Early Childhood Education and Care Settings." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 20 (2): 190–201.
- Biesta, G. 2009. "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21: 33–46. doi:[10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9).
- Black, P. J., and D. Wiliam. 1998. *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*. London: London School of Education, King's College.
- Blandford, S., and C. Knowles. 2012. "Assessment for Learning: A Model for the Development of a Child's Self-competence in the Early Years of Education." *Education 3-13* 40 (5): 487–499.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Broadhead, P. 2006. "Developing an Understanding of Young Children's Learning through Play: The Place of Observation, Interaction and Reflection." *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (2): 191–207.
- Buldu, M. 2010. "Making Learning Visible in Kindergarten Classrooms: Pedagogical Documentation as a Formative Assessment Technique." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26 (7): 1439–1449. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X10000661>.
- Burman, E. 2008. *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. 2nd ed. East Sussex: Routledge.
- Carr, M. 2001. *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories*. London: Sage.
- Carr, M., and G. Claxton. 2002. "Tracking the Development of Learning Dispositions." *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 9 (1): 9–37. doi:[10.1080/09695940220119148](https://doi.org/10.1080/09695940220119148).
- Cottle, M., and E. Alexander. 2012. "Quality in Early Years Settings: Government, Research and Practitioners' Perspectives." *British Educational Research Journal* 38 (4): 635–654. doi:[10.1080/01411926.2011.571661](https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.571661).
- Dahlberg, G., and P. Moss. 2005. *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.
- Dahlberg, G., P. Moss, and A. Pence. 2006. *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation* [online]. Taylor & Francis. Accessed November 21, 2012. <http://lib.mylibrary.com?ID=74137>
- Daniels, K. 2012. "Supporting the Development of Positive Dispositions and Learner Identities: An Action Research Study into the Impact and Potential of Developing Photographic Learning Stories in the Early Years." *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 41 (3): 300–315.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2012. *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Accessed March 16, 2013. <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/eyfs%20statutory%20framework%20march%202012.pdf>
- DfE (Department for Education). 2013a. *More Affordable Childcare*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212671/More_Affordable_Childcare.pdf.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2013b. *Early Years Outcomes*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/237249/Early_Years_Outcomes.pdf.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2013c. *Open Consultation: Primary Assessment and Accountability Under the New National Curriculum*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/>

- uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/223672/Primary_assessment_and_accountability_under_the_new_curriculum_consultation_document_pdf.pdf.
- DfEE/SCAA. 1996. *Desirable Learning Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education*. London: DfEE/SCAA.
- Drummond, M. J. 2012. *Assessing Children's Learning*. Classic ed. London: Routledge.
- Duhn, I. 2006. "The Making of Global Citizens: Traces of Cosmopolitanism in the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whariki." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7 (3): 191–202. http://www.worlds.co.uk/pdf/validate.asp?j=ciec&vol=7&issue=3&year=2006&article=_Duhn_CIEC_7_3_web.
- Early Education. 2012. *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: Early Education. Accessed April 3, 2013. <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Development-Matters.pdf>
- Fleer, M. 2002. "Sociocultural Assessment in Early Years Education: myth or reality?" *International Journal of Early Years Education* 10 (2): 105–120. doi:10.1080/09669760220141999.
- Forman, G., and B. Fyfe. 1998. "Negotiated Learning Through Design, Documentation, and Discourse." In *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*, edited by C. Edwards, L. Gandini, and G. Forman, 239–260. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Gloucestershire County Council. 2013. *Early Years Foundation Stage Assessment*. Accessed March 28. <http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/extra/article/109475/Early-Years-Foundation-Stage-Assessment>
- Graue, E. 2008. "Teaching and Learning in a Post-DAP World." *Early Education & Development* 19 (3): 441–447. doi:10.1080/10409280802065411.
- Grieshaber, S. 2008. "Interrupting Stereotypes: Teaching and the Education of Young Children." *Early Education & Development* 19 (3): 505–518. doi:10.1080/10409280802068670.
- House, R. 2012. *A Summary of Critical Commentary on Reforming the Early Years Foundation Stage (the EYFS): Government Response to Consultation* (Published 20 December 2011). Accessed April 1, 2013. <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/Reflection-House.pdf>
- Hultqvist, K., and G. Dahlberg, eds. 2001. *Governing the Child in the New Millennium*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Johnson, R. 1999. "Colonialism and Cargo Cults in Early Childhood Education: Does Reggio Emilia Really Exist?" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 1 (1): 1999. <http://www.worlds.co.uk/pdf/validate.asp?j=ciec&vol=1&issue=1&year=2000&article=johnson>
- Karlsdóttir, K., and B. Garðarsdóttir. 2010. "Exploring Children's Learning Stories as an Assessment Method for Research and Practice." *Early Years* 30 (3): 255–266. doi:10.1080/09575146.2010.506431.
- Katz, L. G. 1999. "Curriculum Disputes in Early Childhood Education." *Eric Digest*. Accessed March 24, 2012. <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eecearchive/digests/1999/katz99b.pdf>
- Lazzari, A., and L. Balduzzi. 2013. "Bruno Ciari and 'Educational Continuity'." In *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education: Reconceptualising the Relationship*, edited by P. Moss, 149–173. London: Routledge.
- Leggett, N., and M. Ford. 2013. "A Fine Balance: Understanding the Roles and Children Play as Intentional Teachers within the Early Years Learning Framework." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 3 (4): 42–50.
- MacNaughton, G. 2003. *Shaping Early Childhood: Learners, Curriculum and Contexts*. Maidenhead: OUP.
- McLachlan, C., M. Fleer, and S. Edwards. 2010. *Early Childhood Curriculum*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moss, P. 2006. "Structures, Understandings and Discourses: Possibilities for Re-envisioning the Early Childhood Worker." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7 (1): 30–41. doi:10.2304/ciec.2006.7.1.30.
- Moss, P. 2013. *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education: Reconceptualising the Relationship*. London: Routledge.

- Moss, P., J. Dillon, and J. Statham. 2000. "The 'Child in Need' and 'The Rich Child': Discourses, Constructions and Practice." *Critical Social Policy* 20 (2): 233–254. doi:10.1177/026101830002000203.
- Moyles, J., and T. Papatheodorou. 2012. "Cultures of Professional Development." In *Cross-cultural Perspectives on Early Childhood*, edited by T. Papatheodorou and J. Moyles, 151–154. London: Sage.
- Nutbrown, C. 2012. *Foundations for Quality: The Independent Review of Early Education and Childcare Qualifications*. Final Report. Accessed March 28, 2013. <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/14719/1/%7BA098ADE7-BA9A-4E18-8802-D8D4B060858D%7DNUTBROWN%20FINAL%20REPORT%20-%20final.pdf>
- Nuttall, J. 2003. "Influences on the Co-construction of the Teacher Role in Early Childhood Curriculum: Some Examples from a New Zealand Childcare Centre." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 11 (1): 23–31. doi:10.1080/0966976032000066064.
- Ofsted. 2011. *The Impact of the 'Assessing Pupils' Progress' Initiative* Ref: 100226. <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/impact-of-assessing-pupils-progress-initiative>.
- Osgood, J. 2006a. "Deconstructing Professionalism in Early Childhood Education: Resisting the Regulatory Gaze." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7 (1): 5–14. doi:10.2304/ciec.2006.7.1.5.
- Osgood, J. 2006b. "Professionalism and Performativity: The Feminist Challenge Facing Early Years Practitioners." *Early Years* 26 (2): 187–199.
- Ozga, J. 2008. "Governing Knowledge: Research Steering and Research Quality." *European Educational Research Journal* 7 (3): 261–272. doi:10.2304/eej.2008.7.3.261.
- Papatheodorou, T. 2009. "Exploring Relational Pedagogy." In *Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring Relational Pedagogy*, edited by T. Papatheodorou and J. Moyles, 3–17. London: Routledge.
- Plum, M. 2012. "Humanism, Administration and Education: The Demand of Documentation and the Production of a New Pedagogical Desire." *Journal of Education Policy* 27 (4): 491–507. doi:10.1080/02680939.2011.640944.
- Popkewitz, T. S. 1985. "Ideology and Social Formation in Teacher Education." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (2): 91–107. Accessed March 23, 2013. http://ac.els-cdn.com/0742051X85900095/1-s2.0-0742051X85900095-main.pdf?_tid=715d9a50-93b5-11e2-8103-00000aacb35d&acdnat=1364042007_c5d421f8cd2388e47ab25b503db5fc87
- Prout, A., and A. James. 1997. "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems." In *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, edited by A. James and A. Prout, 7–34. London: Falmer.
- Rinaldi, C. 2005. "Documentation and Assessment: What is the Relationship?" In *Beyond Listening: Children's Perspectives on Early Childhood Services*, edited by A. Clark, A. T. Kjørholt, and P. Moss, 17–28. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Ritchie, J. R., and C. A. Buzzelli 2012. "Te Whāriki. The Early Childhood Curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand." In *Curriculum in Early Childhood Education Re-examined, Rediscovered, Renewed*, edited by N. File, J. J. Mueller, and D. B. Wisenski, 146–159. London: Routledge.
- Rogoff, B. 2003. *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: OUP.
- Sightlines Initiative. 2010. Accessed February 2014. <http://www.sightlines-initiative.com/>
- Siraj Blatchford, I., K. Sylva, S. Muttock, R. Gilden, and D. Bell. 2002. *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (Research Report 356). London: DfES.
- Siraj Blatchford, I., K. Sylva, B. Taggart, P. Sammons, E. Melhuish, and K. Elliot. 2003. *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project*. Technical Paper 10 – Intensive Case Studies of Practice Across the Foundation Stage. London: DfES & Institute of Education, University of London.
- Sisson, J. H. 2009. "Making Sense of Competing Constructs of Teacher as Professional." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 23 (3): 351–366.
- Soler, J., and L. Miller. 2003. "The Struggle for Early Childhood Curricula: A Comparison of the English Foundation Stage Curriculum, Te Whāriki and Reggio Emilia." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 11 (1): 57–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966976032000066091>.

- STA (Standards & Testing Agency). 2013. *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile: Handbook*. Accessed March 16. http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/2013_eyfs_handbook.pdf
- Stremmel, A. J. 2012. "A Situated Framework: The Reggio Experience." In *Curriculum in Early Childhood Education: Re-examined, Rediscovered, Renewed*, edited by N. File, J. J. Mueller, and D. B. Wisenski, 133–145. London: Routledge.
- Suárez, S. C. 2006. "Making Learning Visible through Documentation: Creating a Culture of Inquiry among Pre-Service Teachers." *The New Educator* 2 (1): 33–55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15476880500486129>.
- Surrey County Council. 2013. *Guidance for Planning, Observing and Documenting: Individual Children's Learning in the EYFS*. Accessed March 28, 2012. http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/361551/Guidance-for-planning,-observing-and-documenting-individual-v2.pdf
- Taguchi, H. L. 2010. "Rethinking Pedagogical Practices in Early Childhood Education: A Multidimensional Approach to Learning and Inclusion." In *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Childhood Education*, edited by N. Yelland, 14–32. London: OUP.
- Tickell, C. 2011. *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning. An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to her Majesty's Government*. Accessed November 4, 2012. <http://media.education.gov.uk/MediaFiles/B/1/5/%7BB15EFF0D-A4DF-4294-93A1-1E1B88C13F68%7DTickell%20review.pdf>
- Urban, M. 2008. "Dealing with Uncertainty: Challenges and Possibilities for the Early Childhood Profession." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 16 (2): 135–152. doi:10.1080/13502930802141584.
- Whitebread, D., and S. Bingham. 2011. "School Readiness: A Critical Review of Perspectives and Evidence." Occasional Paper No 2, TACTYC. <http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-paper/occasional-paper2.pdf>.
- Wood, E. 2007. "Reconceptualising Child-centred Education: Contemporary Directions in Policy, Theory and Practice in Early Childhood." *Forum* 49 (1&2). http://www.worlds.co.uk/pdf/freetoview.asp?j=forum&vol=49&issue=1&year=2007&article=14_Wood_FORUM_49_1-2_web
- Wood, E., and J. Attfield. 2005. *Play, Learning and the Early Years Curriculum*. 2nd ed. London: Paul Chapman.