Omissions and Presuppositions in Kei Tua o te Pae: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Maureen Perkins

NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal
Volume 16, 2013, pp. 71 - 82

This research note describes findings from an analysis of three introductory booklets on early childhood assessment practice called “Kei Tua o te Pae” produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Analysis involved taking a critical discourse perspective to identify any problems in the implementation of the booklets. Questions based on Gee’s (2011) inquiry tools were used as lenses for close reading of the introductory 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.
Research Note

Omissions and Presuppositions in Kei Tua o te Pae:
A Critical DiscourseAnalysis

Maureen Perkins
Unitec Institute of Technology

Abstract

This research note describes some of the findings from an analysis of three introductory booklets of “Kei Tua o te Pae”, an early childhood assessment practice resource produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Analysis involved taking a critical discourse perspective to identify ways in which text was likely to persuade readers to ignore omissions and to accept without debate a particular assessment discourse. This result was in contrast to the stated purpose of the resource, which was to encourage informed discussion. Questions based on Gee’s (2011) inquiry tools were used as lenses for close reading of the introductory booklets from Kei Tua o te Pae. Three of these questions are described here, as are the findings from that part of the research, which suggest the ECE assessment discourses were changed at least in part through persuasion by omission and presupposition.

Key words: Assessment; Learning Stories; pedagogy; Kei Tua o te Pae.

Introduction

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 (NZ). Kei Tua o te Pae began as a pilot project in parallel with an exemplars project for NZ schools (Ministry of Education, n.d.) The resource is comprised of 20 booklets and was distributed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to all licensed early childhood services (ECSs) and primary schools between 2005 and 2009. Alongside distribution of the booklets the MOE funded professional development to assist ECSs with the implementation of the resource.

Assessment is a relatively new discourse in ECE. The original statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) (MOE, 1990) required teachers to be able to show parents that their children were making progress. At the time, the concept of keeping formal records of what all children were doing and learning was new for many teachers and systems were developed mostly through trial and error (Launder & Dalli, 1997).

The Kei Tua o te Pae resource was developed and distributed from 2004 onward along with the provision of fully-funded professional development for early
childhood teachers. The enormity of such an investment in a single assessment approach and the almost immediate recognition of the resource by the Education Review Office (ERO) in their reviews of ECE assessment processes (ERO, 2007) gave Kei Tua o te Pae a prominence in the sector that few have challenged. This research note critically discusses three of the 20 Kei Tua o te Pae booklets.

Researcher bias

Between 2005 and 2010 I was a facilitator and later national co-director of one of the professional development contracts, the Combined Universities, which was made up of teams from six teacher education providers across NZ. During our work I saw how gaps in the information presented in Kei Tua o te Pae presented barriers to informed discussion among readers of the resource. This was in direct contrast to the stated intention of the resource authors as according to the Ministry of Education “the books were designed as a professional development resource to enable learning communities to discuss assessment issues in general [and] develop their own assessments of children’s learning” (2004, p. 2).

I was fully aware that I began my research with this insight and constantly worked to reduce my own bias. My research tools were selected in an attempt to mitigate any bias arising from my own doubts about the content of the resource. There was no way to prevent such bias from colouring the lenses through which I selected and analysed data and so I also chose to be as transparent as possible about this bias. Such transparency was one of the reasons I selected Critical Discourse Analysis (see next section) as a perspective and also why I chose to write in first person. This would remind readers that the work was my own interpretation and that my analysis of the content of Kei Tua o te Pae was going to be subjective, as was the interpretation of any of the people who used the resource. My interpretative approach was therefore also a model for others to follow in reviewing how they had interpreted the information presented in Kei Tua o te Pae.

Method

The method of investigation was a form of document analysis. I selected as my research samples the introductory books of each of the three sets of Kei Tua o te Pae: Books 1, 10 and 16 (MOE, 2004; 2007; 2009) in order to keep the analysis to a manageable size. These introductory books 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) to analyse the books’ contents.

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). These contexts
became important when selecting what I considered to be important data and included the role of early childhood education in the education sector, the status of the teachers, the role of the government and the need for teachers to have their work valued even when it was different from the methods used in the compulsory sector.

CDS also includes an assumption that the research outcomes will create social change by making room for alternative viewpoints (van Dijk, 1997) and this was a key rationale for carrying out this research.

Questions

The tools for analysis were a range of questions used as a critical reading guide. Seven questions were adapted from the CDS toolkit of 27 questions developed originally by Gee (2011), and three of these are reported in this paper. The three questions were as follows:

1. **What would seem strange to an outsider?**
   This question was used to distance myself as much as possible from the resource I had worked with full time over five years and reduce the bias that this familiarity created. I used the question 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*.

2. **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 I had observed both teachers and facilitators struggling 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.

3. **What evidence is there of persuasion through omission?**
   This question was asked to identify ideas and discourses that were apparently left out of the resource. 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).

   Sometimes it appeared that concepts were omitted from discussion in *Kei Tua o te Pae* because they were assumed by the authors to be a part of the current understanding of their imagined audience. Although accurate presuppositions can be a shortcut to good communication, they can also be used to sway opinion and avoid argument (Saarinen, 2008) by setting assumed common ground for the interpretation of a text (Carroll, Motha & Price, 2008). Such a use
of text is not necessarily deliberate and my focus in this research was on possible outcomes rather than the actual intent of the authors.

Findings and discussion

Using the research tools outlined above I identified six main issues

1. A lack of information about narrative assessment.
3. A lack of information on data-gathering.
4. No mention of summative assessment.
5. The persuasive use of pronouns.
6. Persuasion through omission.
7. Each of these points is discussed in the following sections.

Narrative approaches to assessment documentation

All of the assessment documentation examples in the sample booklets followed a narrative format. The word ‘narrative’ was used only on the final page of Book 1, although this book was intended to introduce the *Kei Tua o te Pae* resource as a whole. There was no theoretical or research support evident for the use of narrative. This lack of information seemed strange, especially given the lack of information in the general assessment literature about narrative assessment practices such as Learning Stories (Blaiklock, 2012).

Perhaps the *Kei Tua o te Pae* authors considered a narrative approach to be already well established in NZ early childhood assessment discourses, therefore requiring no further information. Mitchell (2008) reported that Learning Stories were common practice in NZ early childhood services by 2003, with 78% of teachers reporting that they used them, two years before the publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae*. Other literature however suggests that teachers did not have a good understanding of what constituted a quality narrative assessment or learning story. Although the majority of teachers were using Learning Stories, research from Stuart et al (2008) and ERO (2007) showed that less than half of those teachers were actually describing learning in those stories. This information suggests a mismatch between the *Kei Tua o te Pae* authors’ view of the understanding of their intended audience and the reality, which was likely to impact on how readers interpreted the resource and their ability to implement it in their own practice.

There was nothing in the resource to support facilitators in talking to teachers about narrative. This gap was in strong contrast to a resource developed for the Ministry of Education to inform schools about the value of narrative assessment approaches for teachers of children with special needs. *Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers* (Ministry of Education, 2009) provides some of the theoretical
underpinnings for narrative assessment and importantly provides clear and
detailed information about the learning that teachers could be looking for, how
to show children’s progress, and key indicators for quality narrative
assessment. This information was provided in one brief book but was absent
from the sample booklets of *Kei Tua o te Pae*.

Teachers researching narrative theory as it is described in the literature
(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) may be confused about how it applies to early
childhood education 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. A lack of good basic information may well encourage teachers to
take a surface level approach to narrative assessment, especially teachers who
are unqualified. Currently early childhood education centre regulations allow
for only 50% of teachers to have a recognised qualification and one teacher in
that percentage can be in their final year of study.

**Using photographs in assessment documentation**

There was also a lack of information in the sample booklets about the
pedagogical use of photographs in assessment. Most of the exemplars in the
introductory booklets contained photographs but there was minimal
explanation in why photographs or images should form part of the recorded
assessment.

Mitchell (2008) noted that photography was the most common method used by
ECE teachers to gather and report information on children in both the 2003 and
2007 NZCER surveys. In spite of this, there appears to be no literature on this
practice apart from books and articles referencing pedagogical documentation
as seen particularly in Reggio Emilia inspired services rather than the average
NZ ECE centre. With so many teachers using photographs in assessment, it
seems important that teachers are using these in an informed and critical way
(Perkins, 2010). However, information to support teachers to do this was not
addressed in the introductory books for *Kei Tua o te Pae*, although they were
designed to “inform assessment practice in early childhood education” (MOE,
2004, p. 2). I see this as both a gap and a contradiction.

Book one contained no information about the use of photographs. In Book 10
photographs were described only as being useful in illustrating children’s
progress by using a “series of notes, photographs, and/or learning stories”
(MOE, 2007, p. 11) or, as “the visual language of digital photography [made
assessment] accessible to a range of audiences” (MOE, 2007, p. 6). Book 16
suggested that photographs can provide references for children, such as in the
example given of a child using photographs of a wharenui to guide his work with wooden blocks. “Children learn to ‘read’ photographs at a very early age” (MOE, 2009, p. 6). There is no literature presented to support these statements.

A lack of information on data gathering

Information about data-gathering was identified as another gap, highlighted by the sharp contrast to the importance of observation in the assessment literature. Data gathering was not described at all in my Kei Tua o te Pae sample and observation was barely mentioned, apparently replaced by the term “noticing” (MOE, 2004), but without any clear definition of what ‘noticing’ looked like. Such a gap appears to be another example of a mismatch between the ideal and the real audience for the resource.

Assessment for learning was defined in Kei Tua o te Pae as “noticing, recognising and responding” (MOE, 2004, p. 6). The 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]” (MOE, 2004, 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. Such a gap in Kei Tua o te Pae may be partly responsible for reports that teachers were failing to document children’s learning in narrative assessments (Blaiklock, 2009; ERO, 2007; Stuart, et al., 2008). If the teachers lack information that would enable them to be critical about how they gather information about children’s learning, they are less likely to have useful information for analysis in the “recognising” phase.

The writers of Kei Tua o te Pae may have relied on a government goal at that time of having 100% qualified teachers in the sector by 2012, who perhaps would have learned about data-gathering in their teacher education programmes. However, there does not appear to be any published research evidence to show just what the teacher education providers are including in their courses about assessment and my own experience has been that such content is hugely variable. Without knowing what is being included in those programmes, it is difficult to discuss what this might mean for quality assessment but the development of what Mitchell (2008) labelled as “informal assessment” may suggest a gap in teacher understanding which is not being filled by teacher education programmes.
Informal observation and ‘noticing’ does not appear to be clearly described anywhere in the sample books and may have very different meanings for different teachers. It is logical to conclude that useful analysis is unlikely to follow if the data gathered for assessment purposes is inaccurate or incomplete, based on a passing or momentary “noticing” of a child. 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. I believe that unqualified teachers are less likely to be able to analyse what they have noticed in the context of Te Whāriki 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).

In addition to the implications for everyday assessment and planning, a lack of detailed information about children’s learning and progress over time will have an impact on the quality of the self-review processes expected of NZ early childhood services and will reduce the standard of evidence showing that services are providing quality learning for children. This has serious implications for a sector striving to be recognised as important in the wider education framework, and where up to 50% of the adults working with children are allowed by regulation to be unqualified.

**Summative assessment**

Another topic omitted from the Kei Tua o te Pae introductory books is summative assessment. This omission contrasts strongly with the high visibility of the topic in assessment literature. It was interesting to note that the seminal Black & Wiliam (1998) report which was cited extensively in book 10 of Kei Tua o te Pae, strongly supported an increased focus on formative assessment, but also emphasised the importance of teachers participating in both summative and formative assessment. That view was omitted from the resource.

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 formative assessment that truly informs their teaching. ERO (2008) critiqued the lack of evidence that assessment information is being used formatively in ECE centres, indicating a lack of understanding among teachers of this concept.

**Persuasive pronouns**

A surprising find during my research was the inconsistent use of pronouns in Kei Tua o te Pae. While most of the text was written in the third person, there were also instances of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’. Other guiding documents have varied in their use of pronouns but were internally consistent. Both Te Whāriki (MOE, 1996) and Quality in Action (MOE, 1998) used third person
throughout. *Nga Arohaehae whai hua: Self Review Guidelines* (MOE, 2006) used first person plural throughout. The inconsistency in *Kei Tua o te Pae* seemed strange. I believed that if this was an error it would have been corrected in the editing process and therefore the language choice must serve a purpose.

According to the literature a likely purpose was the building of a sense of shared identity and understanding between authors and readers (Malone, 1997) and a suggestion that the ideas presented were the accepted discourse in a community of practice that included the authors, and was approved by the MOE. For example, “We can think about these aspects of a disposition as being ready, willing and able” (MOE, 2007, p. 5). The sentence could have been written as “These aspects of a disposition can be considered as…” without changing the basic information. The use of the word ‘we’ is more persuasive because it suggests that agreement with this information is part of the membership criteria of the community. Using that pronoun also makes the information seem more personally relevant to readers while increasing the perceived validity of the message (Bramley, 2001).

It implies the involvement of a team who are working together and is an invitation to be a part of that group. Membership of a group is an emotionally safe place to be and is likely to encourage readers to agree with the offered discourse, even if only as part of a “working consensus” (Malone, 1997, p. 121).

To transform practices in a guiding document such as *Kei Tua o te Pae* authors often write about new concepts as if they already are well understood, existing practices of a community (Carroll, Motha & Price, 2008). These practices then become attractive to anyone wanting to be recognised as part of the community, becoming “unquestioned and unquestionable” (Carroll et al, 2008, p. 167).

**What evidence is there of persuasion through omission?**

By positioning one set of discourses as relevant and ignoring others, *Kei Tua o te Pae* established certain discourses as the norms for early childhood assessment 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). As the resource was provided to inform discussion, it seemed strange that it not only focused on a narrative approach to assessment, it ignored other assessment practices that still existed in the community and were strongly visible in the assessment literature. Omission of such information about data-gathering can discourage debate. The inclusion of reasons for moving from more traditional types of assessment to narratives would have enabled readers to understand and contrast the different approaches and to be informed in their discussions.

Removing opportunities for debate may have been a deliberately strategic decision to encourage teachers to accept new discourses. It may also have been simply a mismatch between the authors’ imagined audience and the reality.
Limitations

Not all of the research I carried out is described in this paper and much of it needs further examination. This includes the usefulness of CDS as a critical approach to reading guiding documents, identification of what is valued learning and what was omitted from Kei Tua o te Pae, and the use of authority to present guiding documents as de facto policies. Now that I have findings from the three introductory books it is important to review the remaining 17 books to see whether the findings are generalisable across the resource.

Conclusion

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

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 preferred assessment discourses. I suspect from my own experiences with teachers that many have been left in something of a vacuum in terms of how to implement Kei Tua o te Pae at more than a surface level, especially since the end of funded professional development in 2009.

Future research will include an analysis of the other 17 books in the resource to check that the findings are generalisable across the resource as a whole. In addition I plan to investigate how early childhood centres are implementing assessment and what they understand about narrative assessment and the use of photographs. It is also important to me that I find out what is being taught about observation and assessment in NZ early childhood initial teacher education courses.

Unlike Blaiklock (2009; 2012) I am not advocating that ECE move away from or adopt approaches other than Te Whāriki or Learning Stories. Both are still, I believe, very relevant and effective tools for teaching in NZ early childhood education centres. However, teachers and other early childhood professionals need more information about how services are using those tools so that the sector can share in the work being done in the most effective centres. By being able to provide evidence of effective teaching and assessment, it is less likely that the sector will be required to include assessment tools that do not align with NZ’s early childhood curriculum document and its unique cultural context.
References


Blaiklock, K. E. (2012). It is difficult to review the quality of education if you don’t know what children are learning: ERO and self-review of early childhood services. NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal, 15, 1-10.


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Maureen Perkins is a lecturer at the Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. She teaches on the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) programme. Her research interests include assessment in ECE and the use of ICT for teaching and learning in both ECE and tertiary settings.