

# The assessment of children with disabilities in ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand

Monica Cameron



## ABSTRACT

Early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are grappling with how to implement a strengths-based approach to assess and document children's learning. Drawing on findings from a mixed-methods study undertaken in 2015 that utilised a nationwide survey and key informant interviews to explore teachers' assessment knowledge, purposes and practices, this article provides an opportunity to reflect on changes over time. Descriptive, thematic and document analysis of data revealed that teachers were struggling with how best to assess and document children's needs, identify next steps, and how to best serve children, including children with disabilities, within this strengths-based framework. Additional supports are therefore needed to ensure teachers can effectively assess and document the strengths, interests, and needs of all children.

## KEYWORDS

Assessment, disability, early childhood education

## Introduction

The Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, 2017), is underpinned by a strengths-based approach where what children can do and what they know is the focus, rather than what they are not yet able to do or know. As such, *Te Whāriki* is a competence-based model of curriculum, where children have agency over what they do and experience (McLachlan et al., 2013) within a holistic focus. This strengths-based approach is inherent within 'Empowerment', one of the four underpinning principles of the curriculum framework, which specifies that the curriculum should build "on the child's own experiences, knowledge, skills, attitudes, needs, interests" (MoE, 1996, p. 40). A second underpinning principle of *Te Whāriki* is 'Holistic Development', meaning that "Assessment of children should encompass all dimensions of children's learning and development and should see the child as a whole" (MoE, 1996, p. 30). During the 2017 refresh of *Te Whāriki* these underpinning principles, alongside the principles of

'Relationships' and 'Family and Community', were not altered and remain a central underpinning premise of the curriculum.

The findings reported and discussed in this article come from a larger study exploring early childhood teacher's assessment purposes, practices, and knowledge in relation to assessing four-year-old children's learning (Cameron, 2018). Findings from this study suggested that at the point of data collection some teachers were uncertain about how to assess and how to document children's needs, including children with disabilities, within a strengths-based curriculum framework and approach to assessment. This article will outline key findings from this study and consider what has changed, if anything, over the intervening years. Of note, study data were collected prior to the revision of *Te Whāriki* in 2017. However, the study findings remain relevant and provide a springboard for considering any shifts in teacher practice and knowledge, given the underpinning principles of inclusion and being strengths-based and whānau-centred inherent within *Te Whāriki* remain. Throughout the article it is the 1996 version being referred to unless otherwise specified. Also of note, the terminology used when referring to children with disabilities varies within and across the literature. As a result, various terms are used within this article, including children with disabilities, special needs, and additional needs, to reflect the extant literature. An overview of the context of assessment and the assessment of children with disabilities in Aotearoa New Zealand is now presented, before outlining the study methods and data analysis. Findings related to teachers' assessment practices, beliefs and purposes relating to children with disabilities follow. These findings are then discussed in relation to key policy changes and wider research in the last 10 years before concluding statements and suggestions for future research are made.

## Literature review

### ***Assessment in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context***

Assessment is a central element of the teaching and learning process, and teachers' assessment beliefs and knowledge in turn influence their assessment practices (Cameron, 2018). *Te Whāriki* guides teacher practice in early childhood education (ECE) settings and states that the purpose of assessment is to provide useful information to adults, children and families, and that observations should be used to gather assessment information. It is noted within *Te Whāriki* that each ECE setting should "develop their own distinctive pattern for planning, assessment, and evaluation" (MoE, 1996, p. 28). Within *Te Whāriki* it is also specified that the care and education of children with disabilities should be met in the same ways as for other children. How teachers were to enact assessment was not prescribed with *Te Whāriki*, though the Ministry of Education funded the development of learning stories to align with the curriculum framework. Learning stories are a narrative based formative assessment tool developed by Margaret Carr and colleagues (1998a; 1998b) and were quickly and widely adopted by teachers in the ECE sector.

Learning stories require teachers to notice children's learning, to use their professional knowledge to recognise the learning children are engaging in, and to respond to support children's ongoing learning. This framework of 'Notice, Recognise and Respond' is then documented in the learning

story, and is usually accompanied by photographs. Over time the collection of learning stories, often contained within a portfolio or ePortfolio, should provide evidence of children's learning progress and how teachers have supported this learning. Learning stories were quickly adopted by New Zealand ECE teachers (Mitchell & Brooking, 2007), are the dominant approach to assessment in ECE settings (Wanoa & Johnston, 2019), and are often the only assessment method used by ECE teachers (Cameron, 2018). As a narrative approach to assessment, learning stories were designed to be based on teachers' participatory observations of children, rather than using checklists or more formal assessment methods such as running records (Carr, 1998a). However, the quality and effectiveness of teachers' assessment practices, including how learning stories are being utilised, has been questioned (Cameron, 2018, 2022; ERO, 2007, 2013). The dominance of learning stories, as often the only assessment method utilised, was questioned by Zhang (2015) who has called for a more comprehensive approach to assessment drawing on multiple tools and perspectives. While learning stories were developed to include multiple voices, including those of the child, their family and teachers (Carr, 1999, 2001), it has been found that these voices are frequently not evident in assessment documentation (Cameron, 2023).

### ***Te Whāriki, children's needs and children with disabilities***

As noted by McAnelly and Gaffney (2025, p. 45), "*Te Whāriki* is a curriculum for all children without exception". Explicit reference to the inclusion of children with special needs in ECE settings was made within *Te Whāriki*. Regardless of their needs and abilities, *Te Whāriki* states that all children should have their individual needs met within the day-to-day programme. The concept of education being for all children is underpinned by the view of education as both a human right and a step towards achieving social equity (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). As such, statements referring to meeting the needs of all children often refer to a range of diversities, such as ethnicity, gender and ability, rather than being specific to disability. The broader use of the term is the stance taken within the refreshed *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017).

Within the 1996 version of *Te Whāriki*, the term 'special needs' was used, while the 2017 refresh used the term 'additional learning support' to describe children with disabilities. Despite the changes in language within *Te Whāriki*, according to Macartney (2019), issues relating to disability within the 1996 version, such as how it is theorised and enacted, were not addressed in the refresh. For example, the use of euphemisms to refer to and describe people with disabilities in fact creates more negative perceptions of the person (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Euphemisms are a more indirect, and therefore pleasant, word or expression used to "allow individuals to avoid the bluntness of direct expression, creating a more comforting atmosphere for communication" (Zhang & Su, 2023, p. 75). The words disability and disabled are absent from *Te Whāriki*. Instead, within *Te Whāriki* (1996) references are made to children with special needs, while *Te Whāriki* (2017, p. 12) signals the necessity of teachers' meeting the needs of all children including those "who may need additional learning support". The use of such terms perpetuates a situation where "The existence of disability as a positive identity, disability pride, and culture are absent from the curriculum" (Macartney, 2019, p. 126), and potentially further conceals those with disabilities. As Macartney went on to state, the lack of positive reference to people with disabilities further contributes to the challenges that teachers face in relation to supporting children with disabilities.

Within *Te Whāriki* it is noted that the curriculum provided should “build on a child’s needs, strengths and interests” (MoE, 1996, p. 20). The term ‘needs’ is used 72 times in the document, mostly in reference to the curriculum meeting the needs of children and in reference to children with special needs. Statements including the word ‘needs’ tend to focus on acknowledging that children have “individual needs and rights” (MoE, 1996, p. 19) and outlining that those implementing *Te Whāriki* have a responsibility to provide a curriculum that meets “the needs of all children” (MoE, 1996, p. 27). However, throughout much of the rest of the document the word ‘needs’ is omitted in preference to a focus on strengths and interests when referring to assessing and planning for children’s learning. The term ‘strengths’, by comparison, is used 13 times. Despite it being far less frequently used in the documents, the strengths-based focus of *Te Whāriki* appears to have a profound impact on teachers’ pedagogical and assessment practices.

Niles (2016) found that teachers experienced tensions about where and how to document children’s needs within a strengths-based curriculum and assessment approach. Specifically, Niles noted that teachers were unsure of where to document children’s needs, and that teachers were:

Struggling to know what [to] do with needs for teachers in this setting meant that needs were sometimes ignored in documented assessments. Teachers supported children in areas which had been identified as needs, and areas children were developing in were regularly a point for discussion with families. However, this information was often not reflected in documented assessments. (Niles, 2016, p. 57).

Explicit reference to the inclusion of children with special needs in ECE settings was made within *Te Whāriki*. It is stated within *Te Whāriki* that the care and education of children with special needs “will be encompassed within the principles, strands, and goals set out for all children in early childhood settings” (MoE, 1996, p. 11). As such all children, regardless of their needs and abilities, should have their individual needs met within the day-to-day programme. *Te Whāriki* is also a competence focused model of curriculum, rather than being a performance-based model that is more outcomes focused, structured and prescriptive (McLachlan et al., 2013). As a result of this competence focus, teachers must remain focused on ensuring they are providing a curriculum that is holistic and responsive, including being culturally responsive, that supports the individual child in their developing competence.

### ***Assessment of children with disabilities***

When it is identified that children require additional supports or resources, and permission has been granted by parents, a referral for services and supports can be made to ‘Learning Support’ through the Ministry of Education. While some children begin attending ECE with these supports in place, for many children their engagement in ECE may be the first time that the need for additional supports is formally noted and actioned (Aspden et al., 2022). The referral process involves speaking with an Early Intervention (EI) teacher, who then utilises a range of assessment tools to identify the needs of the referred child (Zhang & Morrison, 2020). The assessment tools used by EI teachers, and other health professionals, have tended to be more formal and standardised than those typically used by ECE teachers, who predominantly use learning stories. Williamson et al. (2006) identified potential benefits and challenges in using learning stories to assess children with disabilities. Potential

challenges were focused on the need for very specific information and detail to be included by the EI teacher and medical professionals, who felt that they still needed to document additional information outside of the learning story. However, the EI teacher and professionals were able to use learning stories to successfully plan to support children's learning "and all participants saw the benefits of using strengths-based, holistic and contextual assessment methods" (Williamson, 2006, p. 24).

In contrast however, MacArthur et al. (2003, p. 150) have questioned whether learning stories "provide teachers with the assessment data they need to make good decisions about the learning and development of children with disabilities". MacArthur et al. highlighted that the assessment tools used by EI teachers tended to rely very heavily on developmental checklists and were therefore incompatible with the strengths-based approach underpinning *Te Whāriki*. Similarly, Caulcutt and Paki (2011) have asserted that EI teachers' use of summative assessments that document what a child could do at a particular point in time in relation to standardised measures, often developed overseas, is challenging. While they went on to suggest that blending the more formal assessment tools and learning stories, whereby assessment tools from both EI and ECE are adapted, could be a positive way forward, it is evident that different approaches to assessment were being utilised for children with disabilities.

More recently the Education Review Office (ERO, 2022), in its national evaluation examining education for disabled children in ECE settings, noted that 40% of teachers were 'not confident', or only 'somewhat confident', using the assessment tools available to assess disabled children. The evaluation also noted that assessment practices within the settings involved in the evaluation did not consistently document children's progress, or their learning, but rather focused on their participation in the setting by documenting what they had done. While it is important to note that this evaluation involved a sample of ECE teacher practice, and cannot be considered representative of the entire sector, the use of surveys, site visits and observations, as well as interviews (involving parents, teachers, leaders and key informants) does mean that a range of data were collected from a broad cross-section of the sector. One of the recommendations arising from this report was the need to ensure that teachers working with disabled children are given guidance and resources to support their assessment practices, "including supports to notice, recognise, and respond to progressions for disabled children" (ERO, 2022, p. 111). Despite these findings, other assessment tools have not been introduced to the ECE sector by the Ministry of Education. Of note is the recent development of *He Pikorua* (MoE, n.d.), a practice framework for those working with children with disabilities across the education sector. Within this resource a range of assessment approaches that are observation and narrative based, family-centred and involving multiple perspectives, are promoted, alongside more traditional standardised assessment practices. These additions suggest a broadening of the assessment practices utilised by EI teachers is underway.

## Methods

This study used a mixed methods design, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather a broad range of data from participants.

### Phase one

The initial phase of the study involved a nationwide online survey in 2015. Participants holding qualifications relevant to their service type were invited to anonymously complete a predominantly quantitative survey. Closed-ended questions employed Likert-type scales and ranked responses, with five open-ended qualitative questions also asked. Emails inviting participation were sent to teacher-led and parent-led ECE services working with four-year-old children, with response rates in comparison with sector composition shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of responses from service types in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector

Service type	Percentage of sector in 2015 <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of survey responses <sup>b</sup>
Te Kura	<1%	1%
Hospital-based	<1%	0%
Playcentre	10%	8%
Te Kōhanga Reo	10%	1%
Kindergarten	15%	33%
Education and Care	55%	57%

<sup>a</sup> Education Counts (2018)

<sup>b</sup> In total 440 responses were received, with 380 included in the final data analysis.

### Phase two

Across 2015/16, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 14 accomplished teachers with more than five years' teaching experience from a range of different service types within two hours of the researcher's location. Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants by contacting overarching organisations and through recommendations from those connected with the ECE sector, who suggested potential participants based on their perceived competence in ECE assessment (Cameron, 2018). A stratified sample was developed, as shown in Table 2, to help ensure that participants were somewhat representative of the region's sector composition. However, not all service types that were approached had teachers who chose to participate.

Table 2. Stratification of the key informant interviews

Service Type	Percentage of sector in 2015	Interviews undertaken
Playcentre	9.70%	2
Kindergarten	14.80%	3
Te Kura	0.02%	1
Education and Care	54.90%	8 <sup>a</sup>
Te Kōhanga Reo	10.30%	0
Hospital-based	0.40%	0
Home-based	9.50%	
Casual Education and Care	0.20%	
Total	99.82% <sup>b</sup>	14

<sup>a</sup> One teacher from each of the following education and care service types was interviewed: – Community based, privately owned, corporately owned, Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Samoan Language Nest, Tongan Language Nest, Māori Immersion setting.

<sup>b</sup> The total adds to less than 100% due to rounding error.

Interviewees also completed a paper copy of the phase one survey to examine any convergence and divergence between the participant groups. Interviewees were also invited to share three examples of anonymised assessment documentation relating to one child, which resulted in 88 examples being shared.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Full ethical approval for this study was sought and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) prior to data being collected. Participants in both phases of the study were informed of the purposes of the study, and their rights as participants prior to their consenting to participate. Anonymity of the phase one respondents was upheld through an anonymous online survey. The identity of the phase two key informants, and the ECE settings they worked in, were not disclosed. The anonymised assessment documentation examples shared in phase two were carefully checked and any identifying information removed prior to storage and data analysis. All data were stored confidentially, with identifying information removed and consent forms stored separately from the data. Phase two participants also had the opportunity to check and release the interview transcripts prior to data analysis. Care was taken to ensure that leading questions were not asked, and advice from cultural advisors was sought prior to both phases of the study.

### ***Data analysis***

In phase one, responses to closed-ended survey questions were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), focusing on descriptive statistical analysis, in particular percentages and frequency counts. Thematic coding was used to analyse the five open-ended survey questions, where individual responses were grouped based on recurring themes and reiterated phrases (Nolan et al., 2013). The phase two interview transcripts were analysed thematically. Through a process of systematic familiarisation, data themes were identified and analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nolan et al., 2013). Examples of themes that arose from the findings included participants' beliefs about assessment, how assessment information was communicated, as well as the challenges participants faced in relation to assessment. The content of the shared assessment examples were analysed using codes identified a-priori based on existing knowledge. The interviewees' survey responses were analysed as in phase one. The findings reported in this article focus on a subset of responses within the challenges identified with assessment; specifically, the difficulties experienced assessing children with disabilities. Responses related to assessment challenges was a recurring, yet unexpected finding of the study, and so worthy of explicit attention.

### ***Participants***

Most survey respondents were experienced teachers, with 60% having gained their teaching qualification prior to 2006. A Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (ECE) was the most held qualification (38%), followed by the three-year Diploma of Teaching (ECE) (17%). More than half the respondents (52%) held leadership roles, and as shown in Table 2, responses were collected from a range of diverse types of services within the ECE sector. The demographic profile of the phase two participants was similar, with 50% earning their qualification prior to 2006. Again, the Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (ECE) was the most held qualification (43%), followed by a three-year Diploma

of Teaching (ECE) (21%), while 50% held leadership positions. Of note, there was more variety across the types of qualifications held by the phase two interviewees in comparison with the phase one respondents, including two who held both primary and ECE teaching qualifications, and one who held a primary teaching qualification only.

## Findings

In this section findings from both phases of the study are reported, focused on teachers' practices, beliefs and purposes in relation to assessing children's needs, and the assessment of children with disabilities. These findings are then considered in relation to current policy and research to reflect on what has changed over the last 10 years.

### ***Assessment practices***

When analysing the assessment examples shared in phase two, it was evident that children's strengths and interests were the focus of the content included within the documents shared. The assessment documents included learning stories, anecdotal observations, whānau input, work samples, and worksheets. The narratives included with many of these documents incorporated specific links to the goals and strands of *Te Whāriki*. While the narratives accompanying many of these documents referred to children's participation, strengths and interests, no references were made to children's needs or indicated that teachers had recognised that additional supports were needed. Despite *Te Whāriki* stating the obligation to respond to children's strengths, needs and interests, evidence of all three aspects being attended to was not present in the examples shared. While learning stories were developed to specifically include the voices of children and their parents, these were infrequently evident in the assessment documentation shared by the key informants. The examples shared did not relate specifically to children with disabilities but provide a snapshot of assessment practice that suggests the multiple perspectives required to inform effective teaching are not commonly documented.

However, the need to respond to children's needs was acknowledged during the interviews. For example, specific learning goals for a child were noted in the assessment documentation, but while the interviewee verbally stated these were included because of an identified need for the child, this need was not specified within the assessment documentation itself. Another interviewee acknowledged that when deciding what aspects of children's learning to assess, they looked at the needs of the child but again this was not written anywhere in the assessment documentation. Similarly, a third interviewee shared that they had chosen the examples because they demonstrated how they were supporting the child in relation to an area of need that had been identified, stating that "... we noticed that he struggles quite a lot with some of his physical skills, like he can't cross his midline and things". As a result, the team had sought support from an Occupational Therapist and had planned specifically to support the child's gross motor development. The assessment examples shared provided evidence of planned responses to children's needs. But the documentation made no references to what the child was not yet able to do, or why the teachers were planning and implementing specific learning experiences to support areas of development.

### **Beliefs about assessment**

Responses to an open-ended survey question about the purposes of assessment demonstrated that some teachers held beliefs that assessing children's learning was something that only needed to happen for children with disabilities. Statements such as "I don't think assessment at this age is important (except children who clearly need extra support – GSE, speech etc.)" and "Only informally, unless there is a specific concern" demonstrated respondents' beliefs about formal methods of assessment only being necessary for children with disabilities. Such statements also revealed underlying attitudes towards children with disabilities requiring different assessment methods from those used to assess their peers. Further evidence of such beliefs was also apparent in the interviews through statements such as "if there are particular areas that we believe need closer assessing, looking at, observing, then that may be a time sampler or one of the other ways of doing it". In total, three of the 14 interviewees shared that formal observation methods were only utilised to gather additional information when teachers had identified concerns about a child's learning. The remaining interviewees indicated that they did use formal observation methods, but with far less frequency than informal observation methods.

### **Assessment purposes**

The survey asked specific questions exploring teachers' purposes in relation to assessment. Respondents indicated that monitoring children's progress was ranked as the fourth most important purpose of assessment, and less than 50% of survey respondents reported using the assessment information gathered to monitor or track children's progress. While 71% agreed or strongly agreed assessment information could be used to track children's progress, only 8% strongly agreed that assessment information could be used to ascertain whether developmental milestones had been achieved and 35% strongly disagreed that assessment information could be used for this purpose. When asked whether assessment information helped to identify learning needs, 94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

Beliefs about how children's learning should be assessed were also evident throughout both phases of the study, with negative views about the use of standardised tests and checklists being repeatedly articulated. When responding to an open-ended question asking how four-year-old children's learning should be assessed, participant beliefs about assessment were shared. Statements such as: "There can be some place for formal assessment only if it is a medical requirement" demonstrated respondent beliefs about formal assessment methods being appropriate for children with disabilities. Several other respondents expressed similar beliefs by noting that formal assessment methods were appropriate to use when concerns about a child's progress had been identified: "I strongly believe that any testing or checklist assessments are inappropriate unless major concerns are held about a child's learning and development and are needed to identify learning problems". Others specifically noted the need to involve outside agencies so that supports and services can be in place and carried over into school.

## Discussion

Persistent views about assessment, and particularly formal assessment, only being necessary for children who have disabilities, were evident across both phases of this study and appear to have remained, despite the refresh of *Te Whāriki*. Such views bring into question how teachers know that children require additional supports if they have not yet undertaken assessment. Views of assessment only being necessary for children with disabilities moreover suggest that many teachers have a limited understanding of assessment and its multiple purposes (Cameron, 2018). Such statements also indicate potential misconceptions about the assessment process itself, signifying that teachers are not aware that they are engaging in assessing children moment by moment as they engage with them. While, as Carr et al. (2002) noted, some of this assessment information is documented, not all of it can be. This however does not mean that it is not assessment. Assessment occurs as teachers make decisions about children's learning and progress based on their professional knowledge, which happens regardless of the methods used to gather and/or document this information.

Findings from this study and more recent research suggest knowing where and how to document children's needs and what they are not yet able to do, appears to be challenging for teachers. While interviewees reported choosing to share particular examples of assessment documentation because it demonstrated plans to support the needs they had identified, the needs were not specified in the assessment documentation itself. Rather, the assessment examples focused solely on what children were able to do, using strengths-based language throughout. Despite advice from professionals outside of the team being sought, such as from an occupational therapist, this was not recorded in the assessment documentation. Such findings align with those of Niles (2016, p. 58) who noted that "However, teachers articulated that children's 'needs' and developments in these areas were frequently not addressed within documented assessments as they were not areas you could write about 'nicely'". As such, the needs of children have become hidden within assessment documentation, contributing to a situation whereby the holistic learning of children is not being focused on, despite it being an underlying principle of *Te Whāriki*.

The findings of this study indicate that teachers appeared to believe that different types of assessment information, gathered using different assessment tools, needed to be collected for children with disabilities to access specialised support services. These views may be influenced by the differing assessment tools used by EI teachers, although these tools are usually utilised by the EI teachers rather than the ECE teachers themselves (Zhang & Morrison, 2020). No specific tests and checklists were named by participants, indicating that while participants were aware that these types of assessments exist, they may not have first-hand experience of using them. Without direct experiences of these types of assessments, teachers are potentially making uninformed decisions about who they are for and the types of information that they gather about children and their learning. It is also important to note that assessment tools gather information about children and their learning, but the value of the tools depends on how teachers interpret and use the information gathered. Therefore, teachers being cognisant with a range of assessment tools and how to utilise the resulting information will be key to supporting teachers in their assessment of children with

disabilities. The inclusion of multiple perspectives within the assessment process, using a variety of methods for gathering assessment information, will strengthen assessment practices in the ECE sector (Cameron, 2018, 2023; Zhang, 2015).

McAnelly and Gaffney (2019, p. 1081) have stated that “Including all children is something many education settings aspire to, yet the outcome of children realising their right to an inclusive education remains elusive for far too many”. Of note however, according to Guralnick and Bruder (2016), teacher’s capabilities in relation to both teaching and assessment is essential within inclusive ECE settings. If teachers are to uphold both the principles of ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Holistic Development’ then it is vital that they have the knowledge and tools to do so as “... inclusive education stays at the level of rhetoric when early childhood (EC) teachers lack confidence in their knowledge and ability to teach all children” (Li et al., 2022, p. 3). The findings of the study being reported here, and across assessment approaches and practices in the ensuing years, suggest that ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand would benefit from additional knowledge and assessment tools to support their assessment practices when working alongside children with disabilities if all children are to experience the promise of *Te Whāriki*.

In engaging with the more recent research and literature exploring the assessment of children with disabilities in ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, it appears that little has changed since the data in this study were collected. Teachers are still grappling with how to assess children with disabilities within a strengths-based assessment framework while using only using learning stories to gather and document assessment information. While examples of more robust assessment practices exist, such as those outlined by Zhang and Morrison (2020), teachers’ assessment practices and knowledge in relation to children with disabilities do not appear to have changed markedly during the intervening period. The necessity for assessment tools that uphold the intent of *Te Whāriki* and meet the unique requirements of children with disabilities in Aotearoa New Zealand is evident. In addition, Griffen et al. (2025) have specifically noted that assessment tools for disabled children that align with Kaupapa Māori-based assessment are also required.

## Conclusion

The strengths-based approach and competency-based model so inherently woven within *Te Whāriki*, and retained in the 2017 refresh, is directly related to the underpinning principles of ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Holistic development’. This article does not seek to contest or change this integral focus, but rather highlights the challenges that teachers are still grappling with as they respond to children’s holistic learning within a curriculum framework and approach to assessment which seemingly downplay children’s needs. Ensuring that teachers have the necessary knowledge and methods to assess all children’s learning, and especially the learning of children with disabilities, will be a crucial next step in helping to ensure that the intent of *Te Whāriki* is actualised and experienced by all children in ECE settings. The ability of teachers to critically reflect on how current assessment approaches embody effective assessment practices for children with disabilities will be key.

Because of the fundamental role assessment plays in teaching and learning, the assessment beliefs and practices of teachers can either support or constrain disabled children's learning and their right to equitable participation in ECE. Assessment therefore cannot be left to chance. All ECE teachers need to have sound knowledge of a range of effective assessment practices for supporting disabled learners. What teachers do shapes children's access to supports, the legitimacy of their learning, and their rights as learners. Although teachers' use of learning stories has the potential to generate useful assessment information, it is also important that teachers have a broad knowledge of assessment and the assessment methods available to them (Cameron, 2018). Consequently, the long-standing influence of learning stories as the dominant approach to assessment in New Zealand is worthy of consideration and critique to help ensure that teachers' assessment beliefs and practices uphold the needs of children with disabilities. While progress has been made in ensuring that children with disabilities experience inclusion (McAnelly et al., 2025), further advancement is required, and this includes in relation to teachers' assessment knowledge and practices. Ensuring that assessment tools and practices meet the needs of children with disabilities, and are culturally responsive, is imperative to helping ensure the enactment of *Te Whāriki* as a holistic and empowering curriculum for all learners.

In light of the findings reported in this article, and in considering next steps for their assessment practices relating to children with disabilities, ECE teachers may find it valuable to consider the following reflective questions:

- What could I do differently in my assessment practices to help ensure effective assessment for children with disabilities?
- What do I need to learn more about in relation to the effective assessment of children with disabilities in Aotearoa New Zealand? How can I do this?

It is important to note that while the results reported here come from a small group of the study participants, these views were a recurring theme across both phases of the data collection, and these views appear reflective of today's ECE context. Although the assessment of children with disabilities was not a specific focus of the overall study, teachers' recurrent reference to this aspect of assessment practices and the challenges they were experiencing in this space, warrants further specific attention. For this reason, this article has sought to shine a light on an aspect of assessment practice teachers appear to be grappling with. The passing of time since the data were collected, and the 2017 revision of *Te Whāriki*, provides impetus for in-depth research focused on the assessment of children with disabilities in ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The recent publication of *He Pikorua*, and the changes to assessment practices utilised by EI teachers signalled within this practice framework, provides further impetus for those in the early childhood sector to reflect on the assessment practices they use.

The author has recently collected data specifically focused on the topic to help contribute to this key area for further research and looks forward to sharing these more recent findings. Safeguarding that the competence-based focus of *Te Whāriki* continues to be implemented and emphasised, while also ensuring that children with disabilities have their strengths, interests and needs met, provides a challenging but important opportunity for teachers and research moving forward.

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## AUTHOR PROFILE



### Monica Cameron

Monica Cameron is the Senior Research Advisor at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand. She has been involved in ECE for 30 years as a student, teacher, PLD facilitator, researcher and in initial teacher education at Massey University and Te Rito Maioha. Monica is committed to supporting kaiako to engage in research informed teaching practice, to help ensure tamariki experience effective pedagogy that supports their learning. Her research interests include ECE assessment, planning and curriculum, pedagogy and intentional teaching, evaluation, leadership and disability.

Email: [monica.cameron@ecnz.ac.nz](mailto:monica.cameron@ecnz.ac.nz)