

**'I'm learning how to do it': reflecting on the implementation of a
new assessment tool in an Australian Early Childhood**

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“I’m learning how to do it”: Reflecting on the implementation of a new assessment tool in an Australian Early Childhood context

The role of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is to support the learning and development of all children in collaboration with families. The notion of inclusion in ECEC is important for providing children with a sense of agency in becoming a learner able to participate fully and actively in their community. This paper illustrates how ECEC assessment approaches risk labelling young children in ‘deficit’ terms. Specifically, through a case study the paper through a case study critically reflects on the implementation of a new assessment tool in kindergartens in the south-eastern region of Melbourne, Australia (low-middle income). Interviews were conducted with managers about the new tool, and documents (checklists and observations) were collected from the teachers. Findings show that the children were positioned as vulnerable with the introduction of the new assessment tool, leading to a diagnosis of ‘at risk’ for many children and a subsequent referral to education consultants, and medical and health professionals. We explore the tensions of labelling young children, ‘at risk’ against the notion of ‘becoming’ that frames the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Department of Education and Training 2019,) and professional understandings of ‘inclusion’. The work of Nancy Fraser on ‘social justice’ augments the examination of this tension.

Keywords: inclusion; planning; becoming; assessment; early childhood education and care; social justice

Introduction

In this paper, we explore a new assessment tool set up by an early childhood education and care (ECEC) management association based in Melbourne Australia. We raise questions about how the new assessment tool positions the work of ECEC teachers and how they view young children. The ECEC association manages multiple kindergartens in a low-middle socio-economic area of the south-eastern suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne. The new assessment tool presented a significant change to many of the

ECEC teachers, with both positive responses and challenges being reported in an evaluation conducted by a research-intensive university education faculty (Authors 2018a).

ECEC assessment approaches risk labelling young children in ‘deficit’ terms. We use Nancy Fraser’s work to explore the notion of ‘social justice’ by critically reflecting on the implementation of the assessment tool through an analysis of interviews conducted with management, and observations and checklists from ECEC teachers. The new assessment tool was designed to create an early intervention type screening for four-year-old children after they had begun kindergarten. We show how ECEC teachers were directed towards focusing on ‘intervention’ rather than ‘becoming a learner’ when implementing the assessment tool. We argue that early intervention approaches position children ‘at risk’ within ECEC programs in ways that could work against inclusion and becoming.

This particular notion of risk has its origins in the early development of modernity (Lupton 2013) with the development of statistical methods and scientific calculations of probability. Scientific knowledge was, as Lupton suggests, “the key to human progress and social order” and that “rationalized counting and ordering would bring disorder under control” (2013, 6-7). Calculations and theorisations of risk transmuted from the natural world to society (Ewald 1993; Third et al. 2019). There is a rich tradition of scholarship of exploring how risk has come to predominate governance in contemporary society (Beck 1992), and in relation to how children and young people are located in risky, deficit ways seen to be in need of intervention to restore their place in the social order (e.g. see Black and Walsh 2015).

The calculation of risk in this form of ECEC assessment produces a form of deficit that has implications for inclusion and social justice, because such assessment is attached to accountability measures that constrain teachers while suggesting which children ‘fit in’ and those who ‘do not belong’. In short, the assessment tool perpetuates a deficit approach to ECEC that works against aspirations of inclusion.

We begin with a review of the literature, specifically focusing on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education and Training 2019) the notion of inclusion and the SMART goal setting strategy used in the assessment tool. The methodology is outlined with a specific focus on a Fraserian social justice framework before critical reflections are shared.

Background Literature

EYLF and Inclusion

In Australia, the EYLF (Department of Education and Training 2019) is a key component of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA 2012). The document is intended to be used by teachers to support the learning of children aged birth to five years, providing learning outcomes and practice principles to support working with children. The introduction of a curriculum framework was a major educational reform in Australian ECEC (Colmer, Waniganayake and Field, 2014). Three key elements feature in the EYLF to characterise children’s lives - being, belonging and becoming. Diagram 1 shows the overlapping of the relationship between learning outcomes, principles and practice as they are contained within the three elements.

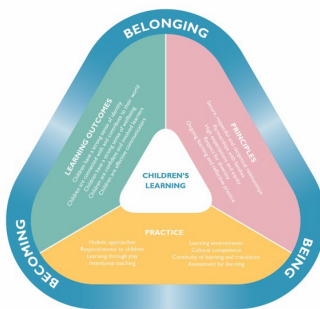


Diagram 1: Elements of the Early Years Learning Framework

According to the Framework (2019):

Belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging.

Being recognises the significance of the here and now in children's lives. It is about the present and them knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life.

Becoming reflects this process of rapid and significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow. It emphasises learning to participate fully and actively in society. (7)

The EYLF motif 'belonging, being and becoming' was adopted by the ECEC profession as it captured salient ideas from early childhood research and the professional literature. The meanings given to this motif and its impact on pedagogical change have been less well documented in the research (Sumsion and Wong 2011).. Furthermore, research has also suggested that translating reformed curriculum to the day to day practices of ECEC educators can be challenging (Colmer, Waniganayake and

Field 2014). In this study, management have tried to translate their interpretation of the EYLF into the day-to-day practices of teachers of early childhood settings with the introduction of the (SMART) assessment tool.

The EYLF has a strong focus on inclusion. Inclusion is about children having access to and being able to participate in high quality and socially-just ECEC. It concerns all children, families and communities having the right to participate in ECEC where “diversity is assumed, welcomed and viewed as a rich resource rather than seen as a problem” (Booth, Nes, and Stromstad 2003, 2). Booth and Ainscow (2011) contend that inclusion is about improved participation and the reconsideration of cultures, policies and practices that support ECEC for all. This requires local ECEC settings to be supported to create a culture of diversity and ‘becoming’ as a basis of learning for all children. ‘Becoming’ is a key element that underpins the analysis of the case study in this paper.

Historically, early childhood education in Australia has focused on early intervention with two distinct features of provision: firstly, there were special education programs for children with disabilities; and secondly, early childhood programs for children seen to be *at risk* (Mellor 1990). This approach viewed disability as a deficit that specific intervention-type programs could manage (Corbett and Slee 2000). More recently, a range of so-called strength-based approaches have been implemented for the inclusion of children with differing needs. For example, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2017) advocates for a strength-cased approach for early childhood teachers when writing transition statements to the early years of school. However, Petriwskyj (2010) contends that “debate continues over the relative merits of

these approaches, the rights of specific diversity groups, the capacity of early childhood teachers to enact inclusion, and the possibility that attention to broader diversity categories increases labelling at the expense of effective educational reform” (342). This suggests that while there is consensus about inclusion as important for early childhood education, the enactment and pedagogy around inclusion appear problematic.

Instead of diagnosis and change being focused on the child, the literature suggests that teacher-child interactions can mediate teacher practice, so children become learners. Warming (2011) writes that teacher mediation based on “values of social recognition and mutual adjustment: shift “from demands of assimilation towards inclusive and reflexive pedagogy” (241). She contends that focusing on the relational rather than on a power-over rationale supports ECEC teachers in coping with “new demands of normality in a way where the children are not blamed, stigmatised and excluded, but with the risk of blaming the teachers if they do not succeed in their effort of such an inclusive practice” (244).

Research shows that increasing constraints on ECEC teachers’ pedagogical work acts as a barrier to high-quality inclusive pedagogical practices including assessment of young children (Lea 2013). It is suggested that changes in values and pedagogical approaches require critique and change in top-down management assessment practices that act as a barrier to inclusive practices. Alternative practices that focus on uncertainty, complexity and diversity (Purdue et al, 2009) could assist ECEC teachers with “engaging in processes intended to enhance knowledge about inclusion, build confidence, and engage in self-reflection [which] may lead to more inclusive attitudes and decreased concerns about inclusive education” (Cologon 2012, 1171). In above

section, we have discussed inclusion in terms of the EYLF (Department of Education and Training 2019). In the next part of the paper we will examine social investment ideology.

SMART and Social Investment Ideology

The assessment tool included the introduction of the SMART model. SMART is part of business management criteria (Shahin and Mehbod 2007) that denotes the acronym for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based criteria. The literature states that by applying this model a smaller number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are warranted, thus decreasing the need to measure all possible indicators. In other words, it simplifies the measurement approach reducing associated administrative burdens and economic costs. The model connects with social investment ideology (Jenson 2010) where governance takes on a perspective that public expenditure is economically beneficial through its investment in human capital. The same logic has been applied to ECEC programs (Ang 2014) as early childhood is perceived as a sensitive time in human development (Mustard and McCain 1999). That is, ECEC has the potential to offer high returns on government investment in comparison to other periods in the life-cycle (Heckman and Masterov 2007).

Hunkin (2019) contends that “This view of quality reflects an empirical positivist reality in which ‘quality’ is assumed to be observable, universal and measurable factors (Dahlberg et al. 2007), salient and applicable to all children and settings” (5). The discourse of quality leads to a ‘deficit discourse’ that positions children within a dominant ‘at risk’ discourse through early intervention type assessment approaches that exclude rather than include young children in learning opportunities for growing relationships and engaging with relevant everyday challenges.

Nancy Fraser's Notion of Social Justice

In this section, we draw on Fraser's commitment to social justice in both normative and practical terms (Hölscher 2014). Fraser discusses social justice as 'parity of participation' arguing that it concerns the 'dismantling (of) institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser 2007a, 27). Rosa (2017) drawing on Fraser's notion writes that "it is in and through participation that we experience affection and meaning in the world (p. 158). Fraser (2007b, 2009) conceptualised 'participation parity' according to three distinct but interrelated elements: redistribution, recognition and representation. Recognition is about cultural justice that respects and validates difference and acknowledges and redresses the cultural dominance of the past. It concerns recognition of people's full participation and partnership in social interactions (Fraser et al. 2004).

Fraser's notion of social/cultural justice has previously been used with Indigenous children in an Australian ECEC context (Herbet 2013) and with teachers in relation to the discourse of human capital ideology presented in the EYLF (Grieshaber and Graham 2017). This study extends the notion of social justice into assessment practices in Australian kindergartens.

Along with the EYLF motif, Fraser's concept of social justice shapes the lenses for interpretation of the data. 'Parity of participation' and the associated element of recognition are used in conjunction with the EYLF element of 'becoming' which involves learning to participate fully and actively in society to analyse an ECEC assessment approach. The concern is that past assessment approaches based on normative expectations of children's development are leading to current and future approaches that do not provide opportunities for young children to become learners and participate fully in ECEC programs.

Method

A social constructionist approach to research was adopted to provide perspectives of meaning that explore commonalities and connections (Ellingson 2009) in how the assessment tool was implemented by the ECEC teachers across the three research sites. Specifically, a qualitative case study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of how ECEC teachers implemented the assessment tool in three kindergartens. Furthermore, what are the implications for ECEC teachers' planning for young children's learning from the assessment tool results in terms of 'becoming'?

Following Yin (2014), this case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (18). Contexts in case studies are also unique and complex, in which interactions between events and human relationships can be unfolded (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). The phenomenon in this study was the introduction and impact of the assessment tool in the context of four kindergartens.

Furthermore, contextual conditions are important to case studies which provide in-depth descriptions and analysis of "a bounded system" (Merriam 2009, 40). The bounded system in this study came from:

- (1) Interview data, which was collected from two people from the management team to generate an understanding of the development of an assessment tool.
- (2) Documents, in the form of the new and then revised assessment tool templates. In total 18 weekly planning documents and 30 individual children's planning documents;
- (3) The check-list templates and observations completed by teachers of three children (see Appendix A).

In this case study, we draw on assessment planning documents which connect with teacher observations of three children. The kindergarten management association collected the assessment documents to be evaluated by the researchers. For this case study, three examples were selected (Merriam 2009) so children from a range of ability levels and different genders were represented. The analysis provides insight into how the ECEC teachers came to place children on the rating scale associated with a revised four-year old skills audit that was a list of developmental milestones that acted as checkpoints for children's development. These ratings positioned young children inside and outside their ECEC programs.

The study engages with document analysis. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that once created, written documents embed potentials of historical facts and therefore can be important documentary data sources. But according to Punch (2014), these potentially rich data sources, tend to be overlooked by researchers. For instance, documents can be difficult to access. In addition, documentary analysis is sometimes seen to be a secondary source of data which may lack authenticity (Fitzgerald 2012). We believe that using a case study design supports document analysis since the strengths of case studies lie in the detailed examinations of a context or a single document (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). When conducting documentary analysis, Punch (2014) reminds us that documents and texts should not be isolated from their social contexts to avoid the deprivation of real meanings. Our analysis of these planning documents is thus informed by the social context of the ECEC settings to capture the particular characteristics within them (Davis 2012).

The documents were analysed for shifts in how the notion of inclusion was perceived and enacted in the ECEC setting. The type of language used such as statements from interviews combined with the language used in the rating scale revealed the underpinning assumptions being made through the assessment tool. Deeper meaning of the assessment tool was derived from analysis and interpretation of the skills audit, the accompanying ECEC teachers' anecdotal notes and the outcomes documentation. A reading of these documents is useful for unpacking the taken-for-granted assumptions that ground these documents and notes (Mukherji and Albon 2018). The anecdotal notes left by the ECEC teachers on the skills-audit documents provided insight into the professional thinking of the ECEC teachers, providing 'material traces' of what the ECEC teachers thought and did in contrast to how they positioned children according to a rating scale.

Rigour in qualitative research is associated with the research results demonstrating trustworthiness of the researchers in respect to ethics and methodology. As researchers we considered processes of reliability of the data collection process, analysis and interpretation (Brown and Gilligan 1993). Ethics approval was obtained prior to commencing the project by the university in which the researchers were based and by the Department of Education, Victoria to conduct research with early childhood educators. The anonymity of participants is protected by using pseudonyms given by the researchers.

Data Analysis

We begin this section by tracing the development of the assessment tool, starting with the decision makers: the kindergarten management association. The year prior to this

new assessment initiative, a screening process was instigated by the ECEC management group in three of its kindergartens. Allied Health Professionals were engaged to provide a 'snapshot' assessment of three and four-year-old kindergarten children's development. An evaluation of this screening process conducted by four researchers including three of the authors of this paper showed that ECEC teachers were uncertain about how to support children's learning in response to the Allied Health Professionals' assessment results; particularly, in the area of oral language development and were seeking support for linking assessment and teaching practices (Authors 2018b).

The second stage of the ECEC management's assessment project was the development of the revised assessment tool. The assessment tool centred on early literacy and numeracy learning, gross and fine motor skills and well-being. The management association employed an ECEC consultant to develop and provide professional learning for ECEC teachers on the approach required to implement the assessment tool. Initially, the association looked into current assessment tools used by their ECEC teachers.

The outcome was that these approaches were seen to be ineffective and time-consuming to implement and document. Consequently, management decided to instigate an action research project based on a new assessment tool developed by an ECEC consultant in conjunction with management. The professional knowledge and experience of their pedagogical leaders was drawn upon to develop the new assessment tool. The background to the action research project illustrates the management team's intention to cultivate a community of practice through this action research project. As the CEO commented: “

We decided to start the journey of having a look at what the teachers were currently doing and how we could improve that process, making sure that it was a process that we did with our staff, not to them.” (CEO, 2017)

A significant aspect of deciding to implement a new assessment tool was that staff were consulted and had input into the process. The CEO describes the process:

We started with a group of about 20 teachers ... They met with the EC consultant every couple of months, to look at one particular part of the planning cycle and really pull it apart. Teachers were bringing examples of what they did and what they were gathering and that showed that a lot of teachers were not gathering useful information on the children. We then looked at how we could develop tools to support the gathering of information. (CEO, 2017)

The process involved evaluating examples of data about children collected by ECEC teachers. It was deemed that this data gathering process could be enhanced, so management decided to develop tools to improve the process of gathering information. The skills audits (Appendix A) mapped out a checklist of skills to be completed twice per year. Accompanying skills audit notes (Appendix B) explained how to conduct skills audits. The Leader of Pedagogy, (a management team member who guided EC teachers in the area of pedagogy) from her perspective, talked about the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the project:

We decided that we needed to act on concerns that came in from our teachers and educators who were struggling with what the planning cycle meant and how much work planning was taking to implement. We started an action research project... We started with a key group of teachers who, alongside an [early childhood] consultant and me, looked at all the areas of the planning cycle. We devised some templates and some tools and some ways of documenting and planning, that we all agreed [upon]. Then we went to all the teachers and educators and all 130 of us gave that a go for a year. (Leader of Pedagogy, 2017)

Originally, the project was to be conducted in 2017. However, the assessment tools subsequently underwent revision, so the date of the researchers' evaluation was extended to incorporate the planning cycle within the revised assessment tool. Management directed EC teachers to complete a selection of templates and tools. These documents included group plans and individual plan templates that aimed to capture the learning of children. Individual plans included formative observations, analysis, goals and a brief evaluation of the goal. Observations were to focus on 'significant moments of learning'. The goals for learning that were outlined in the Individual Plan addendum (Appendix C) were to be 'SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time based'. EC teachers were asked to evaluate their teaching and learning planning goals with a brief note that indicated whether they had been 'achieved, not achieved or working towards, continue'.

The Leader of Pedagogy explained the revised assessment tool: "It is a timeline that captures information on children and provides teachers with assessment tools that they can use for children's learning. It's a skills audit... It's also a group plan, a template, and some individual planning tools." She went onto discuss the pressures EC staff were under "to revise the conceptual understandings that frame their practices." She commented, "... the interconnections between ECEC philosophy as outlined by the national and state ECEC frameworks, educational theory and how individual EC staff learn presented challenges for management and EC staff."

An important point raised by the Leader of Pedagogy was that the revised assessment tool led to "-a sharp increase in referrals. Firstly, to the Pre-School Field Officer ... Other referrals were to health services including Community Health services,

General Practitioners and Paediatricians and Allied Health professionals including speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists...” She went onto say, Now we already know that teachers have made more referrals this year than any other year... I know that there’s kindergartens who have referred half of their groups to regional Health...” (Leader of Pedagogy, 2017). The CEO also remarked on this increase in referrals noting that:

The teacher that I was with this morning, who hasn’t always been great at referring, has I think referred nine children this year to the Pre-School Field Officer (PSFO) program. That’s nine out of 36... I was talking to the PSFO... and they have a target. I think they’ll have reached their full year target by the end of term one. So, they’re finding that they’re having to pull PSFOs out of other regions to come and help... (CEO, 2017)

The Leader of Pedagogy commented on how the revised assessment tool led to an increased workload for the ECEC teachers impacting on their sense of wellbeing. So the assessment tools were modified:

... what was initially meant to be a decrease in workload ... actually was an increase ... So, the change can have an impact on teachers’ wellbeing and how they feel about themselves... we cut back a lot on the information that was in the skills audit (Leader of Pedagogy, 2017)

An example of the revised tool (see Appendix B) for three children: Harrison, Michael and Millie show planning in the areas of (1) personal social and emotional; and (2) communication.

As researchers, we traced the development of the skills audit tool from a notion of ‘becoming’ through a rating that indicates emerging skills to a notion of ‘deficit’ where children are viewed as lacking skills within the first month of their attendance at

kindergarten and referred to external support services. Like the Leader of Pedagogy, we are undertaking the process of 'tracking'. However, the Leader of Pedagogy's aim is for EC teachers to track children's progress whereas we are tracking the development of the revised assessment tool.

We argue that the skills audit which was modified due to EC teacher workload issues represents the children through a deficit discourse. Failures of children (for example to have friends and to follow 3-part instructions) to meet the expectations of their first month of four-year-old kindergarten are blamed upon an assumed lack of social, communicative, physical and academic resources. This failure is located with the young child and by association with their family and the broader community. Stacey (2019) contends that "research which concentrates on the potential effects of deficit discourses on students often critiques the work of teachers who take up such ways of thinking and speaking" (p. 2). Like Stacey, we are interested in looking at the issue from a teacher's perspective and exploring "why and how such discourses may manifest" (p. 2). In this case the implementation of the revised assessment tool created 'deficit' views of the children.

Michael's teacher appears to be in tension with the skills audit. She chooses not to rate Michael on a scale of 1-4 but rather to add an '-' to the checklist. Perhaps, she does not completely understand how the audit works as a rating tool or she could be uncomfortable with the tool and choosing not to use the 4-point scale. She employs some of the language in the original audit skills rating scale in her notes commenting that "Michael's pencil grip, emerging tripod grip ..." The term 'emerging' denotes an act of 'becoming' which connects with the EYLF framework. The child is in the process

of learning the skill rather than being assessed as being able or not able to achieve the required standard.

In contrast to Michael's results, Harrison is regularly rated '4' in the area of 'Personal, social and emotion' and 'Communication'. This indicates that Harrison requires a referral to an external support agency despite already having a recent diagnosis of 'autism'. Yet, when reading the EC teacher's objectives/outcomes for Harrison, a more nuanced perspective of Harrison and his representation in the EC program is presented. Harrison is viewed as 'confident' and a child who responds to adults' whose communication can be supported with visual cues and in terms of interacting with others.

These outcomes represent Harrison as capable of learning and the EC teacher as having the ability to plan an EC program that scaffolds Harrison's learning. However, Harrison's learning needs were assessed as different and beyond what the EC program could provide. A double message is being given. Harrison is represented in the revised assessment tool as a child who on the one hand 'fits in' and on the other 'does not belong'. He is an insider and outsider. Silver (2010) contends that within the discourse of social inclusion the other, the excluded child, is constituted as a 'victim' reinstating their 'powerlessness'. Yet, the EC teacher gives herself as well as Harrison a degree of power through her outcome's documentation (Appendix C).

Millie, a four-year-old girl generally is rated on the scale at 1s and 2s. In terms of 'speaking clearly and fluently' and 'following 3-part instructions' she is rated as 3 which indicates she is 'Delayed: review MILD to MODERATE'. The EC teacher's

anecdotal notes on the skills audit checklist document conversations between her and Millie:

Conversation One

Teacher: It's very important that when I or Ms M talk to you that you have to listen.

Millie: [Turned away from teacher]

Teacher: Now what did I just say? Can you tell me what I just told you?

Millie: The teachers outside so the kids get locked inside.

Conversation Two

Millie: My hat fell off

Teacher: It's on the floor near your chair.

(Millie stared into space for two seconds then looked at the right spot and found it)

These conversations provide a much more nuanced account of Millie's communicative abilities than the skills audit which indicates that within the first three weeks of attending four-year-old kindergarten that she is mild to moderately delayed in this area. It is not to say that Millie does not require support in her development and learning but rather the ECEC teacher's anecdotal notes provides context to the interaction which can be interpreted in multiple ways. The skills audit places the ECEC teacher in a position to determine where Millie is at with her communicative development before Millie is fully cognisant of the kindergarten routine. Millie appears more concerned in Conversation One about the inside/outside nature of the routine than listening to the ECEC teacher.

Discussion

To a considerable extent the assessment tool positioned young children against normative developmental milestones. Fraser in discussion with Rachel Jaeggi (2018)

considers the internationalisation of normative expectations from a previous era and how this can lead to tensions over which normative expectations fit with a given context. In 2014, Keddie noted how schooling had a narrow focus on measuring access, retention and achievement on standardised tests. In recent times, this idea of the standardised test has been incorporated into the kindergarten programs under analysis as a revised four-year-old skills audit. This audit is an example of a type of standardised test underpinned by normative expectations of four-year-old children's development that is in tension with the EYLF motif element of 'becoming'.

As children are rated from one to four in the various areas within their first month at kindergarten the notion of retention is at odds. Children who receive ratings of threes and fours become labelled as mildly to moderately delayed and for the fours requiring a referral to external child-development experts. The retention of children within the kindergarten program is not wholly inclusive in that the program is not creating a space for children to 'become' a learner. In contrast, the children are referred to external programs as they are deficit in areas of development.

Children's participation rights and justice according to recent understandings of inclusion go beyond access to incorporate children's differing abilities. Fraser (2013) argues that preclusion of full participation in institutions is denied through excessively ascribing "'difference' or by failing to acknowledge distinctiveness" (p. 164). The assessment tool through its excessive identification of difference precludes the children from the ECEC program. Whereas supporting children's sense of being, belonging and most importantly becoming would recognise the process of learning leading to full participation. Lea (2010) argues that "labelling may be taking place at the expense of

education reform directed towards more inclusive approaches” (347). The revised skills audit focuses on deficits and risks rather than children’s parity of participation (Fraser 2000) as active learners who are growing and developing with ECEC teacher curricular and pedagogical support.

In this study, the revised assessment tool is positioned within a ‘‘SMART’ model locating it within this policy discourse of quality/deficit. This discourse increases the pressures associated with performativity demands of ECEC settings. The pressure for success is passed down to the child, who if not performing, is seen in deficit terms. At the teacher level the assessment tool is given meaning in various and at times, contested ways. The irony is that in an attempt to cater for local needs and desires (Schulock in Nudzor 2009, 504) the managerialist assessment discourse is setting up an approach where control over children is maintained through “surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation and regulation” (Gore, in MacNaughton, 2005, 63). ECEC teachers are ‘expected to comply’ (Lea 2013) with management’s revised assessment direction and thus, an early intervention style approach is increasingly becoming the standard practice in these EC settings.

We recognise problems of social justice around participation, inclusion and becoming for the four-year-old children in the kindergartens. This recognition leads to questioning and reflection of differences between intentions and practices advocated in curriculum. In this case, the revised assessment tool outcomes did not appear to align with the EYLF curriculum or an overall understanding of inclusive practice. Fraser (2008) argues that misalignment requires ‘recognition’ of the ‘problem’ uncovered. As

such, we advocate for a wide range of inclusive practices that promote belonging in ECEC moving beyond a deficit view of young children. It is important that organisations provide time for critical reflection of assessment practices that provide productive discussions transcending leadership hierarchies. The introduction of new pedagogies and practices requires active and regular reflection to assess all perspectives, especially those of children and how they are positioned in changes in assessment processes.

Conclusion

This study provides examples of young children requiring early intervention type programs as they are measured against assessment criteria which do not provide opportunities for them to ‘become’ learners. These pedagogies exclude them from the mainstream ECEC program and require them to access specialist services. Given the inclusive aspirations of the EYLF, we suggest that such exclusions become matters of social justice.

We argue that critical analysis of ECEC is required amid a climate of tension between teacher professional judgement as indicated by anecdotal notes and a skills audit which compels them to comply to a rating scale leading to the referral of children to external providers. Assumptions embedded in standardised tests and checklists have long been critiqued (Keddie 2012) for how the results of such tests lead to the (mis) ‘labelling’ of young children before they have the chance to grow into becoming learners.

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Appendix A:

Excerpt from Skills Audit for four-year olds

| | |
|--|-----------------|
| | Secure |
| | Working towards |
| | Emerging |
| | |

- The skills audit is a formative data collection tool that must be used for all children attending kindergarten
- There are two audits; one for three year olds and one for four year olds. They are based around the typically developing behaviours and skills for this age group. You need to take their age (in months) into account. For example, a child who is 4.9 (57 months) would have different expectations placed on them than a child who is 4.1 (49 months).
- The audit should be completed by the teacher or an experienced educator, or even better, in collaboration
- It should be completed in planning time; **do not sit with the children and complete the form**
- The audit should be completed twice a year; by the **end** of February and by the **end** of September
- **Do not start completing the audit until you know the child;** you are asked to indicate if the child is emerging, working within or emerging in the skill. You will not be able to do this until the end of February because we won't know the child well enough.
- The data collected can be used in three ways
 1. to set individual targets based on developmental needs (working towards and strengths)
 2. to help you plan for your work with the Peninsula Oral Language Programme (if involved)
 3. to inform your practice. For example, if you ascertain that half of your class are not throwing or catching a ball, then you can plan experiences to teach this skill.
 4. to analyse the cohort of children at all CKP kindergartens
- This audit is a snapshot of development and is not intended to be used in isolation; it will help you to get to know the child and to identify an area so that you can then gather more information

Appendix B:***Skills Audit for four-year olds – Term One completed for three children****Ratings*

| | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | Secure |
| 2 | At risk, review MILD to MODERATE |
| 3 | Delayed: review MILD to MODERATE |
| 4 | Referral Required * If not already ID |

Personal, social and emotional: Dispositions, play, behaviour, relationships

| | Harrison | Michael | Millie |
|--|----------|---------|--------|
| Comes to kinder happily | 1 | - | 1 |
| Enjoys a joke; Has a sense of humour | 1 | - | 1 |
| Perseveres with tasks | 2 | - | 1 |
| Engages in play for an expected length of time | 2 | - | 1 |
| Engages in messy play | 2 | - | 1 |
| Has a friend or friends | 4 | - | 2 |
| Sustains co-operative play with peers | 3 | - | 2 |
| Shows concern for others | 4 | - | 1 |
| Shares time, spaces and equipment | 3 | - | 1 |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----|---|---|
| Mostly regulates own behaviour | 3-4 | - | 1 |
|--------------------------------|-----|---|---|

Communication: attention and listening, expressive and receptive language, early literacy

| | Harrison | Michael | Millie |
|--|----------|---------|--------|
| Joins in with small groups | 3 | - | 2 |
| Joins in with large groups | 3 | - | 2 |
| Talks about home and family | 4 | - | 1 |
| Participates in back and forth conversations | 4 | - | 1 |
| Speaks clearly and fluently | 4 | - | 3 |
| Speaks in sentences of 5-6 words | 4 | - | 2 |
| Expresses feelings and needs appropriately | 4 | - | 1 |
| Uses pronouns correctly | 4 | - | 2 |
| Asks questions | 4 | - | 1 |
| Follows 3-part instructions | 4 | - | 3 |
| Classifies familiar objects | | - | 1 |
| Can identify the use of objects | | - | 1 |
| Participates in songs, stories and rhymes | | - | 1 |
| Chooses books and stories | | - | 1 |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Recognises their name | | - | 1 |
| Notices print in the environment | | - | 1 |
| Can tell you their first name and age | | - | 1 |

Appendix C:
Objectives/Outcomes for Harrison

1. Choose to participate in a new learning experience
2. Follow basic rules and routines
3. Participate in small group experiences

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| IDENTITY | Confident Responds to adults at times |
| COMMUNITY | Plays beside others |
| WELLBEING | Supported to interact with others Responds better when given notice of change |
| LEARNING | Revisits experiences that he enjoys and chooses |
| COMMUNICATION | Supported with visual cues |