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Visibly learning: teachers' assessment practices for students with high and very high needs

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This paper examines the assessment practices of teachers working with students with special educational needs in New Zealand primary and secondary regular and special schools. A national survey was used to identify current assessment practices used by teachers working with students designated, through a resourcing policy, as having high and very high needs. Specifically, the survey sought to determine the type of assessment practices used, reasons for using different approaches, the role of the person carrying out the assessment and levels of confidence in assessing students in relation to learning. The use of learning stories as a form of narrative assessment was further explored through the questionnaires and in a relatively small number of interviews. The results showed that teachers were largely responsible for assessment, and that the three main assessment methods used included collecting examples of work, observations and anecdotal records. Teachers reported confidence in assessing students for learning, but not for funding applications and assistive technology applications. Approaches such as narrative assessment and learning stories were used by some teachers in school-based settings. Learning stories and narrative assessment are strategies where parents, teachers, teacher-aides and students engage in meaningful dialogue around learning. Teachers reported that through narrative assessment they could demonstrate that learners with high and very high needs were visibly learning. Through a sociocultural conceptualisation of formative assessment, the role of teachers and learners in assessment is explored.

Keywords: assessment; special education; narrative assessment; learning stories

Introduction

This paper focuses on the assessment practices used by teachers to portray the learning, and the needs, of learners with high and very high needs in New Zealand. A small portion of these learners receive funding and support through an Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS)¹ and may be enrolled in regular or special schools. A survey of teacher assessment practices, and interviews with those using learning stories, were used to critically examine the possibilities of narrative assessment for learners with high and very high needs. For many years, psychometric testing was the main way students were assessed and this form of assessment was not linked to the day-to-day teaching and learning that took place. Increasingly, assess-

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ment of learning is seen as a way for parents, teachers and students to engage in more meaningful dialogue around learning, and as a means to establish what is further needed to support ongoing learning. Formative assessment practices that show learners ‘visibly learning’ engage both teachers and learners. However, for learners with high and very high needs, where learning is often ‘invisible’ on traditional tests, those assessment practices are needed that capture their learning in-the-moment for a formative function to be realised. The process of assessment can be seen as a way of describing or defining people – about telling a person’s story in terms of what they can do and how they do it. But as Blatt (1987) warns, there are stories that enhance life and others that degrade it and we have to be mindful that our assessment practices relevantly portray individual learning in meaningful and productive ways.

To gauge the extent to which current assessment practices in New Zealand are being used, and why they are being used, we begin by identifying the assessment practices that teachers report using for learners with high and very high needs. Teachers’ perceived goals and purposes of assessment and their rationale for using particular assessment practices are reported. Linked to this are their responses of who undertakes the assessment, whether specialist skills are needed and whether teachers feel confident in their ability to assess learners with high or very high needs. This analysis provides a context for understanding the kinds of stories that are being told for learners with high and very high needs in New Zealand. Of particular interest in this research was whether narrative assessment, in general, and learning stories, in particular, were used by teachers to describe and define the learning process for learners with high needs. Interviews with teachers who currently use learning stories indicated the perceived usefulness of these as a more formative approach to assessment. The survey findings are used to critically examine the potential value of using narrative assessment to make the learning of those with high and very high needs more visible, thereby enhancing and promoting their achievement through assessment.

Making learning visible

In New Zealand, we have yet to see an unequivocal drive from government to ensure all learners have access to an education in their local school. An empirical study recently highlighted how learners with high and very high needs do not have the same rights as all students to learn within an inclusive education setting (Kearney 2009). In addition, the ‘organisational paradigm’ (Dyson and Millward 2000) where schools, rather than individuals, are challenged to radically change, justifies the spotlight being put on schools; the individual learners, caught up in the politics, still remain invisible. This paradigm shift, created largely through the unwillingness for governmental and educational organisations to act intentionally to include all learners, does not support teachers to engage meaningfully with individual learners with high needs. Out of frustration, a systemic analysis and international agenda arose to explore why inclusion has been such a hard agenda (Ainscow 2007; Booth and Ainscow 2002; Kearney 2009). Yet even today, in pockets where inclusive ideals and aspirations are being realised, when opportunities to learn alongside their peers that most young people take for granted are afforded young disabled learners, their learning achievements continue to remain ‘invisible’. The focus of the inclusion debate on ‘mainstream versus special’ and on mechanisms to fund special education has averted much needed attention away from teacher professional conversations around their own learning, and that of their students. Additionally, despite the assessment for learning dialogue, where formative

assessment and strategies such as peer and self-assessment are increasingly used in schools, there is evidence of the exclusion of high and very high needs students from mainstream assessment contexts (Bentley 2008). Therefore, the ongoing invisibility of the learning of students with high and very high needs will continue in mainstream practices, and only their 'disability' is foregrounded when there is a specific testing for determining their eligibility for funding to receive services and equipments.

In theory, however, the assessment of and for learning, that is, the formative assessment agenda, should enable parents, teachers and students to engage in discussions, dialogue and activities around learning, establishing what is further needed to support learning and what learning has occurred. Learning is maximised when the learner participates in assessment activities in a natural and authentic context. Assessment methods used by teachers and educators portray the learner and learning in different ways according to the theoretical models influencing the assessment strategies incorporated (Hargreaves 2005). Bourke and Mentis presented a range of models used in assessment in special education and note how:

Learners and learning are framed in different ways depending on the assessment lens through which learning is viewed. It is not only 'what' we look for when assessing learning, but also 'how' we look for it; that is, the particular aspect of learning we assess, and the tools and practices we use to assess it, which determines the picture we get of that learning. (2007, 309)

Pryor and Crossouard (2008) have suggested a sociocultural conceptualisation of formative assessment in order to encourage further theoretical understandings in this area, and it is our intention to contribute to such theorising. In their model, a central position is accorded to the negotiation of assessment criteria, understanding them as discursively produced. They also highlight the social nature of formative assessment, as a 'site where both teacher and student identities are constructed and performed' (2008, 9). Issues of power in formative assessment are suggested to reside in the negotiation of identities, and the agency of both students and teachers is understood as being partial and qualified.

Authentic assessment

We suggest the term 'authentic' assessment, defined as processes that aim to gain information on real events in the learner's context as assessment, and suggest that this offers great potential for making learning visible for learners with high and very high needs. Where traditional psychometric assessments focus on learners' deficiencies through single scores on static atomistic tests, authentic assessment conceptualises learning as complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic and uses a contextualised, ecological approach to assess modifiability. The need for such approaches for children with high and very high needs has long been recognised (Rouse and Agbenu 1998).

Opinion differs as to what constitutes authentic assessment; however, there is general consensus that unlike traditional assessment, it focuses on learning and the kind of learning that happens in real-world situations (Gipps 1994; Mueller 2006; Wiggins 1990). While traditional assessment involves selecting one right response through recall or recognition in contrived contexts, authentic assessment involves many different responses through construction and performance on tasks in real-life situations.

Authentic assessment, reminiscent of Pryor and Crossouard's (2008) divergent assessment, is about learning to learn and as such breaks down the barrier between

assessment and learning. It offers teachers, practitioners and parents a way to gather information on prior knowledge and existing skills in order to identify the next learning goals and the best teaching strategies to support students with diverse needs to meet those goals (Oberg 2005). This involves partnership with others and can be done by demonstrating learning growth and opportunities through using portfolios, e-portfolios, narratives, digital narratives, self-assessment, peer assessment, concept maps, graphic organisers, journals, simulations and demonstrations. Narrative assessment, as a form of authentic assessment, uses a systematic framework, for example learning stories, to enable teachers, students and parents to examine learning through their multiple perspectives and across different contexts.

There are few previous and current reviews of the assessment practices of teachers with children with high and very high needs. A survey of 114 teachers in the UK found that assessment was largely informal, idiosyncratic and geared to achievement and many schools did not have integrated assessment and programme planning systems (McNicholas 2000):

One of the themes was the isolation felt by many teachers and the separation of their work from their colleagues. The dearth of training opportunities was believed to adversely affect the quality of understanding of pupils' needs and the provision to meet them. A lack of clarity about assessment was a general feature of the findings. (2000, 151)

Ninety-three teachers in Finland participated in a questionnaire survey (Kontu and Pirttimaa 2008) and found that 22 different methods of assessment were being used with children with high and very high needs. The medical, behavioural and Piagetian basis of assessment tools, while helpful in certain ways, was found to be incongruent with functional-ecological tools for assessing the quality of life and planning for the future. What, then, are the tools being used by New Zealand teachers to frame the learner and learning, particularly in relation to those students with high and very high needs?

Narrative assessment

Narrative assessment has been developed to provide a collaborative approach in assessment between teachers and learners, and to take a strengths-based orientation in supporting student learning. While this approach has largely been developed in the early childhood sector (Carr 2001), as an assessment approach, it has key principles that underpin effective assessment with all learners. More recently, narrative assessment and the use of learning stories as an assessment approach has been explored with young children with special educational needs (Dunn 2000). Of significance to teaching and learning, narrative assessment moves away from a developmental perspective to a sociocultural perspective where the environment, peers, teachers and parents are integral to the assessment process, and where the assessment is premised on the belief that context makes a difference to student learning and assessment results, and that there is not a linear progression to child development. For learners with high and very high needs, this approach is critical, given that developmental stages are unpredictable, and often irrelevant to their learning needs. Assessment that values the learning potential of the individual and that identifies, in real terms, what the child can do, holds value in terms of reliably supporting further learning outcomes. In contrast, a deficit approach, often identified through normative measures, may provide insight into what a child is not capable of, but it does not provide a systematic pedagogical support for maximising further learning.

Narrative assessment has shown that the use of learning stories is likely to increase the involvement of teachers, teacher-aides, parents and students in the assessment process, and provide a mechanism for greater empowerment and self-determination for all participants in the learning process (Cullen, Williamson, and Lepper 2005). Consistent with this, the action plan for GSE² (Ministry of Education 2006) outlines the importance of self-determination and supports the involvement of ‘adults actively seeking children’s opinions and encouraging them to contribute to decisions’ (13). The development of strong, respectful and positive relationships between teachers and learners, between teachers and parents, and between teachers, parents and educational professionals is a critical factor in a successful formative assessment process and such relationships have been shown to be enhanced through the use of learning stories (Cullen, Williamson, and Lepper 2005). The move away from an expert-model in assessment allows for greater self-determination for the learner and increases the opportunities and the context for personalising learning. Such alternative dynamic consultation models have been trialled in England (e.g. Hymer, Michel, and Todd 2002), which highlighted the challenges around power relationships that need to be overcome. Hymer, Michel, and Todd argue that effective consultation and assessment is complex, and requires educators to develop ‘skills in active listening and dynamic questioning to a level that affirms the role of teachers as good learners (rather than knowers) in creating environments in which learning leads development’ (2002, 57).

Acknowledging the students’ worldviews through narrative assessment and the use of learning stories legitimises another way of viewing their goals, aspirations, achievements and strengths. It also provides a unique perspective on the world of a child with significant needs, their challenges, their joys and their motivations to learn (Bentley 2008). It is through creating a shared vision for their future (rather than an adult perspective, an expert perspective or a medical perspective) that further learning can be assured and their authentic story made visible.

Learning stories focus directly on the learning and teaching process. The aim of assessment shifts from one of testing isolated skills and subsequently identifying deficit areas to one of evaluating the learner in the process of participating in the regular curriculum. As Carr puts it, ‘learning stories reframe pessimistic narratives that take a deficit approach’ (2001, 103). The learning story is written to describe the setting and context, the people present, the learner’s actions, the equipment being used, the dialogue and the outcomes associated within the participation. The ‘story’ is supported with a combination of photographs, digital recordings and work samples. Depending on the learner’s ability, their commentary and own analysis is incorporated (Rose, Fletcher, and Goodwin 1999), and then analysed to see what learning dispositions are apparent and what the next steps are for the learner to develop further.

Carr (2001) refers to four Ds to structure the process: describing (defining what learning is going on); discussing (talking with others about the interpretation); documenting (using text, pictures or work samples); and deciding (what to do next). These stages overlap in a dynamic process. Learning stories document both pictorially and in text, what, where, when and how teaching and learning is occurring. They can include views of the parents, teachers, support workers and the learners. Professional language becomes more accessible and the approach is more culturally sensitive and collaborative. This approach has similarities with ‘alternate assessment’ being suggested in the USA for students deemed to ‘have severe disabilities’ (Browder, Spooner, and Bingham 2004). Browder, Spooner, and Bingham (2004) suggest the need for assessments that

are inclusive and applicable for all children, that involve a portfolio approach that includes observations, recollections and anecdotal notes.

Particular care needs to be taken not to under-interpret or over-interpret the learning stories for learners whose voice might not always be heard. Under-interpretation can result in the learning story being little more than a photo album with captions, while over-interpretation could lead to ascribing insights about the learning situation that are not necessarily shared by the learner. The observer and narrator's accuracy, insight and understanding are essential for the learning story to be a valid and reliable assessment tool. As Anning, Cullen, and Fleer (2004) note, the value of the approach depends on the teachers' understanding of the process and their knowledge of children and learning.

Issues of validity and reliability can be addressed through multiple observations and documentation over a variety of naturalistic settings by the people most closely associated with the child and individual interpretation is always open to challenge from other team members (Dunn 2000).

The New Zealand context

Within the New Zealand system, learners with special education needs include those with learning difficulties, communication, emotional or behaviour difficulties, or intellectual, sensory or physical impairments (Ministry of Education 2009). Learners with special education needs usually receive support through the school they attend, but if their needs are defined as significant (high or very high), then extra services are available and funded by the Ministry of Education. Only 3% of children in New Zealand are defined as having high or very high needs and qualify for these extra services which include: speech-language support for learners with high communication needs; support for learners with severe behaviour difficulties; specialist therapy help and extra teaching through the ORRS; educational assistance from a teacher-aide for students with high health needs who can attend school; or Regional Hospital Health Schools services for students who are not able to attend school because of their health (Ministry of Education 2009).

As part of an initiative to support the assessment of all learners, the New Zealand Ministry of Education developed a process for school-initiated narrative assessment and curriculum exemplars for students with high and very high needs who are achieving within Level 1 of the New Zealand curriculum. These are specifically targeted exemplars, developed in authentic contexts with young people with high and very high needs, by teachers, teacher-aides and parents, and students. The aim is to demonstrate ways to identify, narrate and support student learning across contexts. This initiative has been developed in both special and regular school settings, and in the primary and secondary sectors.

The current study

Ongoing evaluation of this initiative took place over a three-year period (2007–2009), and in the first phase, it involved identifying the assessment practices that teachers currently used for learners with high and very high needs in New Zealand schools. This paper reports on the first phase results from a national survey sent to the primary, secondary and special schools across New Zealand. The purpose of the questionnaire was to establish baseline data on primary and secondary teachers' use of assessment

in general, and narrative assessment specifically, for learners with high and very high needs. In addition, six teachers across three primary schools were interviewed in three different geographical areas. The schools were identified as those who had some experience of using narrative assessment and learning stories. Two schools were regular primary schools and the third was a special school. The four teachers from the primary schools were using learning stories for all their children within their class.

Methodology

The survey and interviews focused on the role, rationale and use of assessment by teachers for learners with high and very high needs within the New Zealand context. Quantitative approaches were used to gather national baseline data on teachers' current practices and the use of national assessment practices for students with high and very high needs. A national survey was used to establish an understanding of the decisions teachers made when identifying assessment practices for students with high and very high needs. The survey attempted to establish how, when and why teachers chose to use the assessment methods they did. To complement these data, qualitative research approaches were used in three schools to gather case study examples that illustrated the implications for teachers using narrative assessment.

A 29-item questionnaire was developed on assessment practices, and two copies were sent to every primary and secondary school in New Zealand towards the end of the school year in November 2007. The introduction letter and information sheet invited teachers who teach students with high and very high needs currently operating at Level 1 of the curriculum to complete the questionnaire. Within two months, 964 respondents had returned the completed questionnaire.

A Teacher Reference Group was established to support the development of the national survey. This group consisted of teachers representing the primary and secondary sectors, and the special school sector, and who were in teaching as well as management roles. The types of questions ranged from asking teachers to identify when they assessed (e.g. when they do not know the learner's needs, don't know what the student knows, want information from the parents, etc.) to how confident they were in assessment (e.g. in relation to accessing resourcing, knowing the student preparation for an IEP, identifying teaching opportunities and so on). Teachers were asked to rate the usefulness of a range of 23 assessment tools and were asked to indicate how they used the assessment tools of up to 25 identified options, and why some were not used.

This national survey attempted to establish how, when and why teachers chose to use the assessment methods they did. The majority of respondents (88%) were females, 11% were males and 1% were missing data. The educators who responded to the questionnaire were experienced teachers with nearly 70% having 11 years or more of teaching experience (42% had 21+ years of teaching experience). Of those respondents who indicated their school type ($n = 958$), responses were largely from primary schools (68%). Other breakdowns included secondary schools (16.1%), intermediate schools (5.3%), special schools (7.3%), area schools (1.3%), correspondence school (1.4%) and other (0.7%).

The quantitative data were managed and analysed through statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) and the qualitative responses and comments through NVIVO 8. SPSS is a software package for quantitative datasets that allow the generation of frequency measures and cross tabulations. Complementing this, NVIVO 8 enables the management and systematic structuring of the rich qualitative datasets.

Results

Largely, teachers assess students to support their learning. The *reasons* or purposes teachers gave for assessing students with high and very high needs were clear: to help students with their next step learning (88.8%); to identify students' strengths and weaknesses (76.7%) or the level of students' achievement (71.2%); and to adapt their teaching (69.9%) (see Table 1). There was minimal response to the items indicating that assessment took place when the teachers disagreed with either parents' or specialists' assessment, or for comparisons with other students. The data show that assessments take place sometimes for information to parents (58.3%) and to support applications for funding (51.8%).

The type of assessment methods used for students with high and very high needs was explored with the teachers. To do this, the teachers were asked to rate what assessment methods or tools they used, did not use and the reasons for their response. Twenty-four identified assessment tools or strategies were included in the questionnaire. These were chosen in consultation with the Teacher Reference Group and the Ministry of Education. These assessment tools or strategies included various approaches used by teachers or educational psychologists in schools. The results showed that the three main assessment methods for learners with high and very high needs were: collecting examples of work (910 teachers) and observations (910 teachers); anecdotal records (851 teachers); and portfolios (770 teachers) (see Table 2). These were followed by checklists (744 teachers); interviews (727 teachers); and

Table 1. Purposes of assessment.

	Mainly		Sometimes		Never		<i>n</i>
	Frequency	Valid (%)	Frequency	Valid (%)	Frequency	Valid (%)	
Want to help students with their next step learning	847	88.8	103	10.8	4	0.4	954
Want to know what the students' strengths and weaknesses are	723	76.7	205	21.7	15	1.6	943
Want to know what standard/level the student has achieved	673	71.2	253	26.8	19	2.0	945
Want to know how to adapt your teaching	658	69.9	266	28.3	17	1.8	941
Don't know what the student knows	537	58.3	333	36.2	51	5.5	921
Don't know what to do to meet the learner's needs	380	42.0	437	48.3	88	9.7	905
Want information for the parents	335	36.3	539	58.3	50	5.4	924
Are applying for resources or funding	334	37.0	467	51.8	101	11.2	902
Want to know how the student compares with other students	223	24.4	371	40.6	319	34.9	913
Don't agree with the specialist assessment	47	5.4	421	48.3	404	46.3	872
Don't agree with the parents' views	42	4.9	423	49.1	397	46.1	862
Other	35	71.4	14	28.6	0	0.0	49

Table 2. Types of assessment methods used.

	Used		Not used		Missing	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
asTTle	225	23.3	631	65.5	108	11.2
BURT word reading test	499	51.8	317	32.9	148	15.4
Collecting examples of work	910	94.4	11	1.1	43	4.5
Observations	910	94.4	6	0.6	48	5.0
Psychometric tests	121	12.6	638	66.2	205	21.3
Standardised norm tests	430	44.6	386	40.0	148	15.4
Portfolios	770	79.9	78	8.1	116	12.0
Curriculum-based tests	600	62.2	238	24.7	126	13.1
Junior oral screening test (JOST)	230	28.9	557	57.8	177	18.4
NZ curriculum exemplars	526	54.6	311	32.3	127	13.2
Observation survey of early literacy achievement (six year net)	369	38.3	361	37.4	234	24.3
Progressive achievement tests (PAT)	289	30.0	507	52.6	168	17.4
Running records of reading	715	74.2	182	18.9	67	7.0
Interviews	727	75.4	114	11.8	123	12.8
Checklists	744	77.2	65	6.7	155	16.1
Anecdotal records	851	88.3	26	2.7	87	9.0
Self-assessment	546	56.6	288	29.9	130	13.5
Peer assessment	431	44.7	313	32.5	220	22.8
School entry assessment	410	42.5	293	30.4	261	27.1
ASDAN assessment	92	9.5	709	73.5	163	16.9
P-level assessment	57	5.9	751	77.9	156	16.2
PROBE	342	35.5	495	51.3	127	13.2
Early childhood exemplars	180	18.7	414	42.9	370	38.4
Learning stories	305	31.6	431	44.7	228	23.7
Other	53	5.5	0	0.0	911	94.5

running records or reading (715 teachers). The least used assessment methods were P-levels (57 teachers), Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN; 92 teachers) and psychometric tests (121 teachers).

Teachers reported that the most *useful* assessment information was obtained through observations (78.9% of 939 responses), anecdotal records (56.2% of 920 responses), portfolios (51.7% of 916 responses) and checklists (49.6% of 905 responses). Of least use for this group of learners, were standardised norm tests (33.6% of 894 responses), asTTle (assessment tools for teaching and learning, 37.3% of 858 responses) and PATs (progressive achievement tests, 42.8% of 874 responses).

The most common forms of assessment methods used by teachers were collecting examples of work, observations, curriculum-based tests, running records of reading and checklists (see Table 3). For those teachers who reported using these forms of assessment did so to assess what the student learned, to report, to assess IEP progress, to plan next teaching steps and to identify learning strengths and difficulties.

Table 3. Reasons for using assessment methods.

Method is used	To assess what the student has learned		To report		To assess IEP progress		To plan my next teaching steps		To identify learning strengths and difficulties	
	Frequency	Valid (%)	Frequency	Valid (%)	Frequency	Valid (%)	Frequency	Valid (%)	Frequency	Valid (%)
asTtle	152	67.6	106	47.1	85	37.8	158	70.2	178	79.1
BURT word reading test	294	58.9	189	37.9	195	39.1	201	40.3	268	53.7
Collecting examples of work	678	74.5	718	78.9	631	69.3	642	70.5	622	68.4
Observations	705	77.5	637	70.0	661	72.6	711	78.1	705	77.5
Psychometric tests	30	24.8	52	43.0	39	33.2	37	30.6	69	57.0
Standardised norm tests	256	59.5	255	59.3	168	39.1	219	50.9	276	64.2
Portfolios	422	54.8	675	87.7	349	45.3	310	40.3	355	46.1
Curriculum-based tests	477	79.5	295	49.1	267	44.5	385	64.1	359	59.8
Junior oral screening test (JOST)	108	47.0	92	40.0	114	49.6	137	59.6	170	73.9
NZ curriculum exemplars	308	58.6	207	39.4	196	37.3	378	71.9	307	58.4
Observation survey of early literacy achievement (six year net)	256	69.4	203	55.0	175	47.4	234	63.4	294	79.7
Progressive achievement tests (PAT)	172	59.5	155	53.6	99	34.3	142	49.1	204	70.6
Running records of reading	569	79.6	455	63.6	471	65.9	580	81.1	554	77.5
Interviews	397	54.6	491	67.5	363	49.9	363	49.9	362	49.8
Checklists	532	71.5	337	45.3	382	51.3	434	58.3	430	57.8
Anecdotal records	539	63.3	554	65.1	518	60.9	550	64.6	524	61.6
Self-assessment	361	66.1	181	33.2	161	29.5	256	46.9	293	53.7
Peer assessment	290	67.3	94	21.8	87	20.2	167	38.7	228	52.9
School entry assessment	221	53.9	165	40.2	146	35.6	235	57.3	321	78.3
ASDAN assessment	66	71.7	59	64.1	48	52.2	51	55.4	59	64.1
P-level assessment	36	63.2	23	40.4	32	56.1	40	70.2	37	64.9
PROBE	252	73.7	197	57.6	180	52.6	244	71.3	266	77.8
Early childhood exemplars	95	52.8	54	30.0	58	32.2	100	55.6	104	57.8
Learning stories	175	57.4	138	45.2	118	38.7	166	54.4	173	56.7
Other	42	79.2	36	67.9	32	60.4	40	75.5	43	81.1
<i>n</i>										

Note: NB, respondents could select more than one response.

The main reason given for not using an assessment method was that the ‘test was too advanced’ for learners with high and very high needs. The tests that were reported as being too advanced for students to participate in included: curriculum-based test (95.4%); self-assessment (93.8%); peer assessment (91.7%); PAT (90.5%); running records of reading (87.4%); NZ curriculum exemplars (84.2%); interviews (84.2%); standardised norm tests (81.9%); BURT word reading test (80.1%) and aSTTle (71.6%).

Teachers reported that they generally undertake and lead the assessment process. When identifying who ‘usually do’ and also, ‘should’ lead the assessment, the respondents rated, in descending order: teachers, special education needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), Ministry of Education – Special Education staff (GSE) and then teacher-aides as usually being involved. However, when combining the percentages of ‘sometimes’ and ‘usually’, teachers remain key to undertaking the assessment (94.9%), but are followed by teacher-aides (71.8%) and GSE (71.8%) and SENCO (58.7%). Leading the assessment is still seen as the teacher’s role. Results showed that when combining ‘sometimes’ and ‘usually’ for ‘who should lead the assessment’, teachers were seen as leading the process (98.7%), followed by GSE personnel (89.8%) and SENCO (82.2%). Fewer believed teacher-aides should lead this process (65.4%).

Teachers reported confidence in assessing students in relation to learning, but not for funding applications, or assistive technology applications. In their day-to-day learning and teaching, teachers reported confidence in their ability to assess students with high and very high learning needs (38.1% very confident, 57.6% confident). Teachers’ self-reported confidence levels are strong in assessment practices that support them to ‘know the student’ and ‘prepare for an IEP’. Generally high levels of confidence were also reported in relation to providing feedback to parents, identifying learning and teaching opportunities and accessing resources. There was less reported confidence in assessing students for assistive technology applications to access funding and for ORRS applications.

Teachers report that when they have a learner with high or very high learning needs in their classroom, in their view, they (the teacher) require specialist skills in teaching (56.9%) and learning (57%). A minority of teachers believed that they did not need specialist skills in teaching (11%) or assessment (12.1%).

Learning stories were used by a small number of teachers represented (only 305 of the 964 teachers reported using them). These teachers used them: to assess what the student learned ($n = 175$), to report ($n = 138$), to assess IEP progress ($n = 118$), to plan next teaching steps ($n = 166$) and to identify learning strengths and difficulties ($n = 173$). It was interesting that though relatively few teachers reported using narrative assessment, the majority did employ strategies that formed the basis of this type of assessment, for example, observations (910 teachers), examples of work (910 teachers) and interviews (727 teachers).

Six teachers across three primary schools were interviewed in three different geographical areas. Two schools were regular primary schools and the third was a special school. The four teachers from the primary schools were using learning stories for all their children within their class. All six teachers reported that they highly rated narrative assessment and learning stories as a valuable pedagogical tool. They felt it created a form of evidence of student learning as well as becoming an effective communication tool for parents that was not apparent through other assessment means. As one teacher put it, ‘Parents like it. It’s the proof. We’re not just making it up. It’s the evidence.’

Some of the teachers had used the learning stories as a subsequent springboard for further learning with the student and found that this motivated and raised the self-esteem of the child. Teachers attributed this to the students recognising that the teachers valued them by giving them time, by listening to their views, by describing and recording the learning story and then showing and discussing the subsequent learning story with them.

All teachers talked about the importance of the learning story being a communication tool to discuss learning with both teachers and children. One teacher noted how 'jargon' was often used by teachers and learning stories simplified and made accessible the learning outcomes of students. Another teacher reported that, when families were involved and participated in the learning story process (through writing some themselves or reading the school-based learning stories), they came to understand and know the competencies and learning areas that their child was immersed in.

The learning stories were a vehicle to illustrate student learning outside of a 'boxed' or structured assessment system. As one teacher said, 'students don't fit into boxes', and learning stories enable the holistic picture of the child's learning, across time and contexts. Teachers talked about concrete and material evidence that learning stories produced. One of the outcomes of the *use* of the documented learning story with learners was that teachers noticed a visible change in the child's motivation and self-esteem and the beginnings of self-assessment.

Conclusions

The overall results of the national survey and the teacher interviews showed that teachers' reasons for assessing learners with high and very high needs were mostly to support students with their next step learning and identify their strengths, weaknesses and the level of achievement, as well as for teachers to adapt their teaching. Teachers reported that the assessment methods they mainly used and found most useful were: collecting examples of work, observations, anecdotal records and portfolios while the least used and least useful methods were psychometric tests. Thus, both the reasons for assessment, and the methods used, are consistent with a formative assessment approach for learners with significant needs to allow for learning to be made more visible.

The findings relating to who *does*, and *should*, lead the assessment process were mixed. While teachers reported that they mostly do and should lead this process, they identified teacher-aides as next most likely to *do* the assessment but least for who *should* lead this process. Thus, while teachers are comfortable in leading the assessment, the role of the rest of the assessment team, which could include Ministry Personnel (GSE), the SENCO and teacher-aides, or indeed parents and the students themselves, needs clarification.

Teachers reported confidence in assessing students in relation to learning, 'knowing' the student, preparing for the IEP, reporting to parents and accessing resources, but not for funding or assistive technology applications. This again indicates that teachers' assessment of learners with high and very high needs is more teaching and learning focused than oriented to specialist service provision. This links to teachers' reported need for specialist teaching, learning and assessment knowledge and skills.

A significant finding of the national survey was that despite their orientation to a more formative assessment approach through the use of observations, work samples and interviews, learning stories were comparatively unknown and seldom used, by the

majority of teachers. Teachers reported knowledge of the underlying philosophy and the use of basic techniques of a formative approach as well as a perception that this approach provided more *useful* assessment than standardised norm tests.

Findings from the fieldwork interviews with teachers who *are* using learning stories provided rich feedback on the value of using this form of assessment for parents, teachers, students and support teams. Teachers highly rated learning stories as a valuable pedagogical tool for demonstrating evidence of student learning and as an effective communication tool for parents. Learning stories were perceived as being useful as a springboard for further learning which motivated and raised the self-esteem of the learner and provided a concrete way for learners to experience being listened to.

Given that teachers support the underlying approaches of narrative assessment for learners with high and very high needs, and identify the benefits of learning stories generally, the conclusion from this research is that learning stories have much to offer in terms of ensuring that the assessment stories for learners with significant needs enhance their learning. They also offer further possibilities to explore the sociocultural complexities of assessment, in the unique aspects of the learning and assessment situation. Pryor and Crossouard's (2008) sociocultural model shows a development in our understanding of assessment in its focus on the negotiation of assessment criteria and the negotiation of teacher and student identities and roles. However, in learning stories, we can uncover further complexities. So, instead of understanding assessment as negotiations of identities and role, the development of learning stories conceptualises assessment as the development of relationships between individuals and groups. 'Identities' being too static, and one-sided, lacks the inter-subjectivity of a relationship. In developing learning stories, 'the relationship' encompasses a conversation between several people, thereby necessitating an active participation between the student, teacher, parents, teacher-aide, SENCO and specialist support.

Following on from this phase of research, the next phase of the evaluation will explore how teachers engage with using learning stories in their classrooms with students with high and very high needs. There will be a phase of interaction with teachers, policy-makers and members of the academic community that echoes the original development of formative assessment in wider educational settings (Black and Wiliam 2003). The next phase of the New Zealand Ministry of Education initiative is to provide professional development for invited teachers to use and further develop the learning stories exemplars that have been specifically designed for learners with significant needs, by their teachers, teacher-aides and parents and students. The evaluation of this phase will identify the complexities inherent in this professional development process, and track the outcomes for teachers and learners using learning stories. The aim of the evaluation will be to assess the extent to which the use of learning stories as an assessment tool for this group of learners tells a story that enhances the lives of the learners and portrays their learning in a productive and visible way. The next phase of the research will enable further contribution to a sociocultural model of assessment.

Notes

1. Students with high and very high needs who receive ORRS constitute about 1% of the school population. The resource funds specialists to provide advice and programmes to meet a student's special needs, additional teaching time and teacher-aide time when learners need support with personal care and/or to engage in the curriculum (Ministry of Education 2009).

2. Group Special Education (GSE) is a group within the Ministry of Education that employs specialists to support learners with high needs, and their teachers, in early childhood centres and schools (e.g. educational psychologists, speech-language therapists, special education advisers, advisers of the deaf and physiotherapists).

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