

Learning through play and assessment

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“We need a teacher who is sometimes the director, sometimes the set designer, curtain and backdrop, and sometimes the prompter. A teacher who is both sweet and stern, who is the electrician, who dispenses the points, and who is even the audience – the audience who watches, sometimes claps, sometimes remains silent, full of motion, who sometimes judges with scepticism, and at other times applauds with enthusiasm.”

Loris Malaguzzi, cited in Rinaldi, 2006, p.89

How can we use Malaguzzi’s quote to understand the learning in a play-based environment where assessment is an essential and natural way of the process of teaching and learning? This was my focus as a Dr Vince Ham eFellow in 2020.

In a play-based learning environment, the teacher has many roles and responsibilities, including that of one who interferes/interacts with children’s play to support learning. This can often direct (and misdirect) children’s play towards specific goals or intentions. However by performing what Malaguzzi mentions in his quote we can see that in order to scaffold children’s learning through play, the teacher draws on a set of skills. These include:

- Developing a sense (and habit) of listening and observing closely to the processes of children’s play and inquiry.
- Reflecting, revisiting and investigating children’s actions, conversations, interactions, urges so as to be able to assess knowledge, sustain interest, and plan future actions.
- Planning meaningful and playful provocations or adding to the existing environment in order to enrich exploration and learning, enabling children to test out their developing theories as related to their play and inquiry.
- Finding ways to stay close to the children’s ideas, resisting the adult agenda.
- Teaching skills as and when required at meaningful stages in the project.
- Researching, participating, and offering information as a means of aiding and scaffolding discovery and exploration.
- Documenting the process of projects of play and inquiry, revising with children, looking forward to more information and details so the children can build on new knowledge and experiences.
- Engaging in dialogue with students; scaffolding their meaning of play and inquiry.

ASSESSMENT AND PLAY

Each of the bullet points above are not just the skills needed to facilitate play, they are also the skills needed to assess play. Just like play is hard to define, so too is assessment, especially with very young children. In my classroom for 5 and 6 year olds, I use play as the medium for learning and teaching. However, the notion of play doesn't always sit well with the implications of the word "assessment" in school settings.

As teachers place themselves as observers, they notice the engagement, interests, knowledge, learning, children's urges, skills. Teachers are able to adjust to a situation where children explore and learn, so being able to make appropriate choices on how to act next. After some consideration I realised that assessment is basically a cycle and the diagram below represents the process of assessment in a learning through play environment where teachers observe (1) and analyse the children's play/experiences they gather information/data (e.g. children's interests, urges, physical, emotional and behavioural, developmental stages, etc.) that will help the teacher to know each child and prepare future strategies for teaching. To have a good understanding of each child's interest and learning stages, it is important to keep track (2) of their interests, learning, needs, etc. This information will give the teacher the necessary data to apply assessments (3) accordingly, responding (4) appropriately to each need and stages. This cycle suggests a constant and continuous opportunity to assess as children play. It shows the support necessary to the system of learning and teaching in the play-based learning environment.

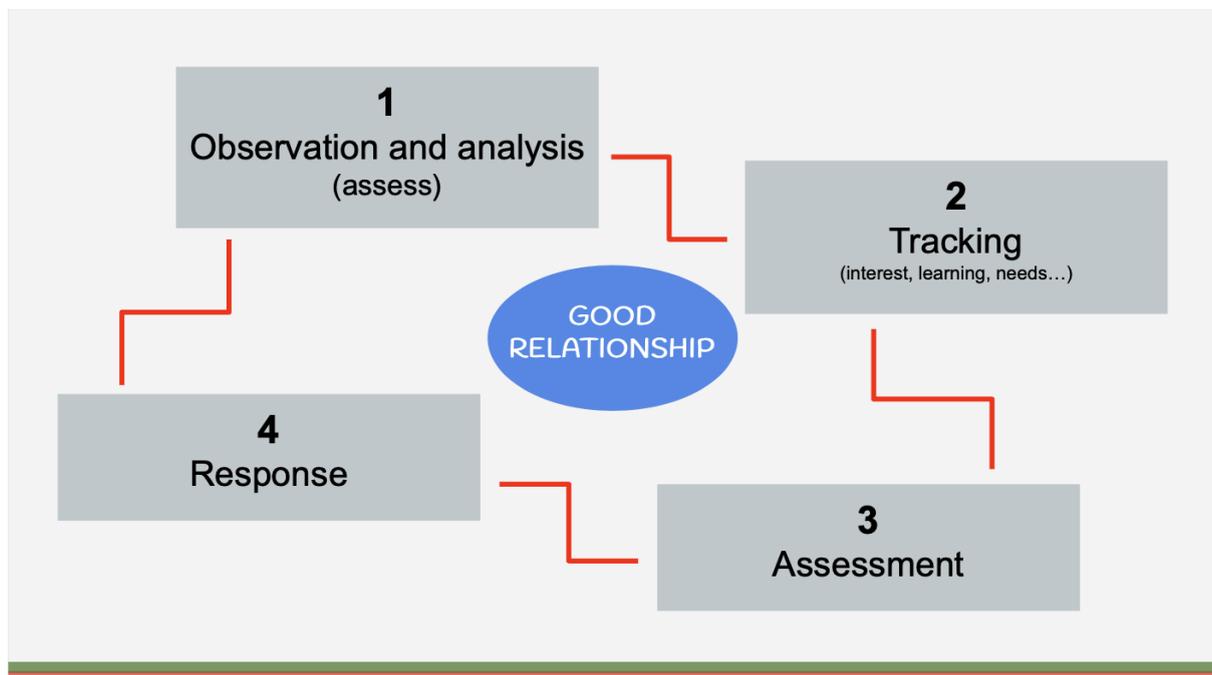


Diagram by Patty Barbosa

SO ARE PLAY AND ASSESSMENT HAPPILY MARRIED?

Play and assessment can indeed work together happily in a creative and informed relationship that is responsive to the children's interests and needs. We want to support play-based, dynamic environments which are safe and challenging for learners and teachers (Kangas, 2010), creating brave and meaningful learning.

To illustrate how to marry assessment and play, I reflected on one example of a group of children exploring the arts learning area of the curriculum. Alex (name changed), a five year old boy, created an army of knights by making some puppets. He engaged in many different imaginative experiences with his army by role playing with the puppets. Through his enthusiasm and constant creation of new stories with his puppets, he gathered a new army of friends who joined him through this journey.



This journey lasted one term (sadly interrupted by the Covid-19 lockdown). During this time Alex and his friends discovered new ways to communicate their ideas, to write texts and record dialogue. They came to understand that there are different purposes for texts as they collaborated to write a play. During their writing sessions, they worked on understanding some basic grammatical rules like punctuation and text structures, which are examples of academic learning.

Alex and friends had many opportunities to work on the five key competencies from the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006):

- Thinking
- Relating to others

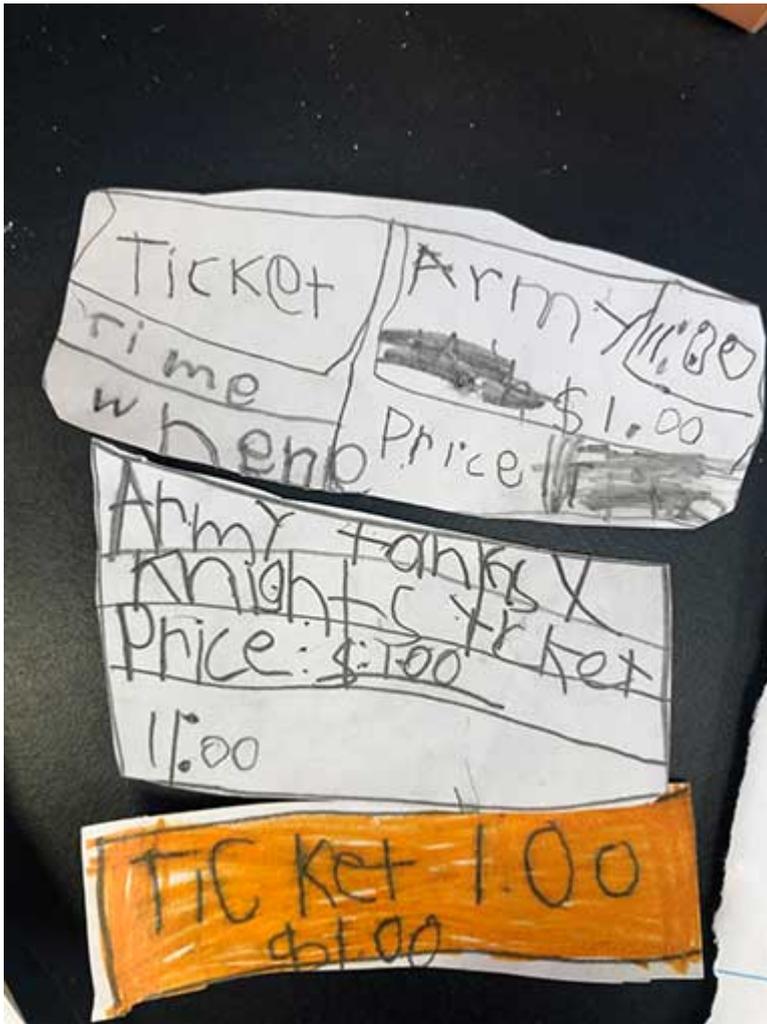
- Using language, symbols, and texts
- Managing self
- Participating and contributing

Alex and his army of friends were engaged in deep learning as they experienced learning through their own interests. As well as developing their writing skills, they conquered the fear of speaking in front of an audience as they worked on the common goal of preparing a puppet show.



Left: Play curtains prepared by the children for the puppet show. Right: Crew collecting the audience tickets.

As the project evolved, other skills were required such as mathematics and marketing, which gave other children the opportunity to participate with their individual and more specific skills. They created tickets, invites, [representative] money, scenarios and even a videographer was requested. Throughout this journey, many learning opportunities happened and the outcomes were varied, exceeding curriculum expectations.



Show tickets prepared by the children.

The children took ownership of their learning and trusted their choices during the journey. They succeeded in every way. When the interest waned new interests arose, new adventures began, carrying and implementing the learning from previous experiences. The cycle of observing and analysing, tracking, assessing and responding continued.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The role of the teacher in this journey was as Malaguzzi suggests. In this case, because the teacher observed attentively, she was able to scaffold and enhance the learning. The teacher needed to learn the right time to intervene so she would not interfere with the process of creation. She followed children's lead as they imagined their own story lines, and encouraged them to ask questions, and to look for answers. She observed how her suggestions and gentle questions supported the children to set new goals and create new strategies based on their prior knowledge. This intentional teaching encouraged their progress, supporting them in a respectful and trustful relationship. Student agency is prime in this environment, and the teacher's role is to understand (through close attention); respect the children's ideas; and then decide when and how to act. These are the elements of assessment in a play-based learning.

Understanding how teachers work to assess learning through play is continuously evolving. I hope that this journey continues to grow through research in New Zealand and that the desire to find simple and practical ways of marrying assessment and play as learning continues to grow. As teachers engage in this brave, responsive, complicated and yet beautiful journey of seeing through the process, I hope we continue learning how to merge assessment into the play-based learning environments in ways that are respectful, responsive, valuable, meaningful and fun.

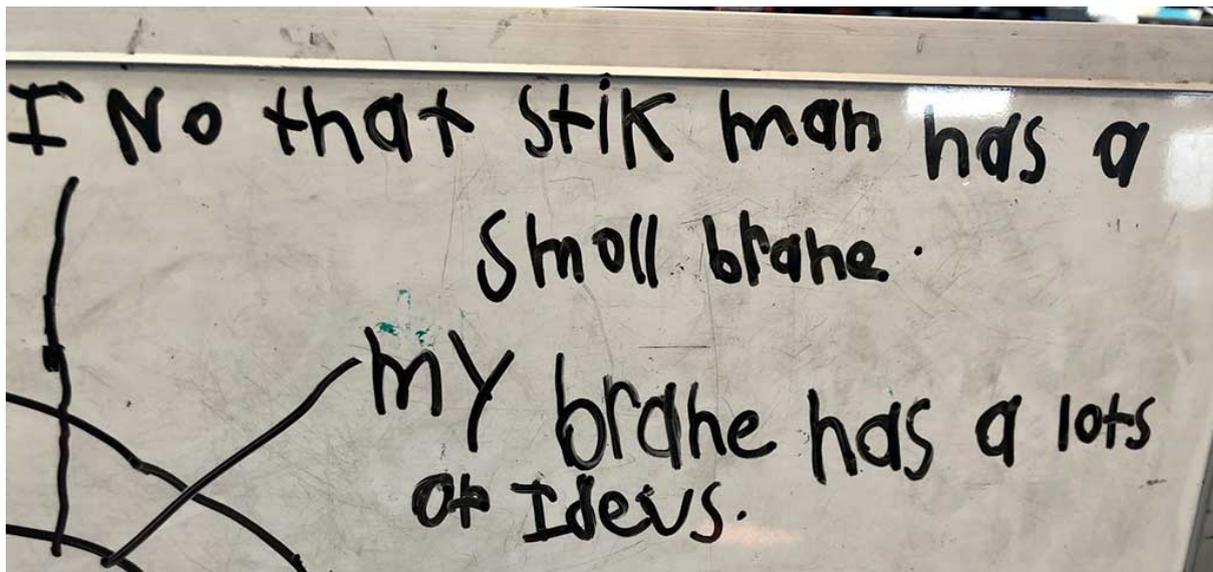
The CORE Education Dr Vince Ham eFellowship gave me the opportunity to notice the importance of the Malaguzzi quote, which empowers myself as a teacher as the scaffolder who does not say to the students what and how to do things, but instead, as one who places herself in a watching mode, observing the right time and way to act and participate in their knowledge building process. As a teacher in the play-based learning environment, I want to be this adjustable, flexible teacher, capable of directing, watching, applauding, guiding, assessing all the way through.



Left: Race track. Right: child explores addition by classifying pretending food and planning 'a meal' in the family area



Left: Children hide in the bushes for hunting animals in the wild. This was part of a children's project about guns, from the boys' interest in playing guns. Right: play in the doctor's area where the doctor checks baby's heartbeat.



Two children reflect after flipping through the book *The Stick Man*. They drew the stick man and supported each other with writing the sentence.

[Find out more about the Dr Vince Ham eFellowship and read Patty's research report](#)

References

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Patty Barbosa, originally from Brazil, teaches at Summerland Primary School in Auckland. She was a recipient of the Dr Vince Ham eFellowship in 2020. Patty's research project centred around implementing data collection and assessments to support a rich, responsive and genuine learning in a play environment.