Play-based Learning and Assessment: Considerations on how to marry the two in a working relationship

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Where it all began

Brasilia is the capital of Brazil. It is a city planned for a population of two million people, and was designed in the shape of a butterfly (some people say it is a plane!). Brasilia accommodated the bureaucratic and economic interests of the country and was architecturally designed to accommodate the country’s multiculturally diverse populations. It was also intended to be the safest city in the country.

My name is Patty Barbosa and this is the city where I was born, with its charming and elegant roads, residential areas designed for families and where I could freely learn through play (inside and outside school environments). The sweet memories of childhood!

An industrial era has taken a heavy toll on the world. The childhood experiences I had, as I learned while playing; are not shared by most of the children across the world. Despite numerous theories and systems intended to support the way children learn, the reality is a system that contradicts itself.

The ‘Learning through Play’ movement in education is one way many teachers have tried to resolve the dichotomy between how children learn and how the education system requires teachers to teach. In a play-based environment, the children are seen as capable and powerful individuals co-constructing knowledge through hands-on and social interaction experiences. With teachers alongside them, children search and engage in activities which result in meaningful learning.

However, because the vestiges of the industrial education system are still entrenched in our curriculum, the traditional concept of assessment is still present. As a teacher committed to play-based learning, this conundrum has bothered me for some time.
In December 2019, I won a Vince Ham eFellowship with Core Education. This gave me the opportunity to do a small scale action research project about play-based learning and assessment. I could have in-depth discussions with teachers, collect data that influenced this research and try to find some answers to the specific tensions between play-based learning and assessment. While learning through play is acceptable for children before they start school, many still strongly believe that play cannot be assessed as learning, especially at school. In this report I share my research journey to reveal some of the strategies I found ‘to marry’ learning through play and assessment in a workable relationship.

**Play and its benefits**

Play contributes positively to a child’s learning, enhancing their natural capacity for self-motivated, intense learning experiences. It provides opportunities for children to build up creativity. Play encourages their critical thinking as children learn to solve their own problems. While research and experiences show that play is beneficial to children’s learning, we still face barriers and prejudice from parents, teachers and institutions.

I am not going to discuss all the benefits of play here, however, I think it is important to highlight what the research says about play and its benefits to children’s learning and how we still face challenges to let the children play at school (Menzies, 2015).

When young children are allowed to play and explore, they develop abilities to identify, negotiate, take risks and create meaning. Children engaged in quality meaningful play experiences, have well-developed memory skills, and are able to control emotions and behaviour. These are important to academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

The New Zealand curriculum also includes the key competencies as the values that guide teachers in the classrooms. Through play-based learning, teachers are able to provide students with opportunities to work on all five competencies. Through innovation, inquiry, curiosity, sustainability, respect, thinking, using language, and managing self, relating to others, participating and contributing (NZ Ministry of Education 2006 [MoE]), students grow into confident learners, able to identify and use these competencies as and when needed.

**Assessment**

Assessment is usually seen as an integral part of teachers’ work. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2011) describes assessment as a tool to provide information and support that enhances student learning and changes teacher practice/approach, showing the relationship between assessment and learning (Hipkins, & Cameron, 2018.).
How teachers adapt to meet a goal to provide equitable, fair and authentic learning is partially shown in this research project; which aims to illustrate the teachers’ understanding of assessment and play (in its school context), finding the balance to develop a relationship where both play and assessment processes can work in collaboration to support learning.

The Ministry of Education acknowledges that “students learn at different rates, in different ways, etc...” (2018. p. 6). Assessment processes play a significant part in constructing the equalities that have been debated in the literature and within the hope for the growth of equity in the process of evaluations (Hipkins & Cameron, 2018) which strongly relates to this project.

Play and assessment – Negotiating a workable relationship

At the early primary levels, teachers are required to assess students’ academic, social and developmental learning (key competencies). In a play-based setting, integrating assessments to support and monitor students’ learning is a challenge to most.

As with any relationship, many of the tensions between learning through play and assessment can be solved by working together - children, teachers and families - and discussing the learning to emerge through play. Social media (e.g. facebook and seesaw) are some examples that can support the communication between families and schools and strengthen these relationships by informing student’s learning.
Assessment and play-based learning can seem at odds with one another. To make this marriage work, one has to make visible the relationship between teaching and learning, and how assessment in play-based learning informs curriculum design and indicates progress.

In a play-based learning environment, teachers value children’s voices through interacting with and following their interests to develop learning through different learning areas.

The standardised tests are still part of the main way to assess learning for a majority of schools, however, teachers in the learning through play settings are using a more holistic lens to assess learning, opening new opportunities for a successful marriage between both, learning through play and assessment.

The continuous and written observations and learning stories are tools often used by teachers. Learning stories describe learning moments, outcomes and next steps. The ability of teachers who work on different ways to marry the traditional way of assessing learning with a more holistic approach, is helping students and educators to find innovative and meaningful ways of assessing learning.

In learning through play settings, the teacher’s priority is to create a positive and inspiring classroom environment in an atmosphere of trust (Bishop 2019), acknowledging learner’s prior knowledge, language and ways of making sense of their world, which support students to succeed.
Finding answers

As part of my research design, I used an online survey and follow-up interviews to gather information from my Kāhui Ako teachers already using play-based learning. This data helped me firstly, to understand how these teachers used play to facilitate learning and secondly, how they assessed learning using this pedagogical approach.

The teachers involved in the survey had different approaches to enacting play in their environment, however, all had the same understanding of allowing their students to learn as they know best, respecting their developmental age.

The data indicated that the teachers involved in this inquiry were able to partially identify the role of the assessment in a play-based learning environment as a potential tool to empower teaching and learning. These teachers believed that a play-based learning environment provides opportunities for a holistic evaluation of the learning, however, balancing their play-based pedagogy and their school’s assessment requirements remained an issue.

Fifty per cent of the teachers believed that assessing learning through play created an holistic overview of the child’s learning. Most were unsure about linking their observations to the curriculum. Concerns about not knowing ‘how to do [assessment]’ were evident in most of the interviewees’ responses.
Seventy per cent of the teachers recognised levels of engagement of the children with their learning while playing was positive, and helped the assessment process:

“The children are more relaxed and aren’t put on the spot or under pressure to answer questions. The opportunities are there for you to get more of a holistic understanding of where the child is at.”

The teachers in this project continued to use standardized tests and maintained their belief that these were important because they measured specific progress in the curriculum areas. 25 percent of the teachers have implemented a new way of assessing learning areas by transforming standardised tests into checklists where they utilise observations of play to checkmark students’ achievements. The majority (75 percent) acknowledged, however, that through play they have been able to assess key competencies more efficiently. One teacher reported:

“Being able to observe the key competencies in a more authentic setting has been beneficial. Using observation recording sheets has also been beneficial but I do understand that it needs to be implemented more.”

My learning

During this project research, I found that the dichotomy between the play-based learning and assessment requirements makes this marriage complicated. However, teachers are working to find the right balance and actions necessary to make it work in their respective environments.

After many reflections and discussions based on the interviews and surveys, I came up with a list which I found a helpful resource to continue my inquiry. The reasons below represent why the relationship between play-based learning and assessment has been difficult for teachers, alongside some suggestions for overcoming the issues:

- There is a dichotomy between assessment, what it means and what is required, and play-based learning (PBL) for both teachers and schools.

This dichotomy, however, can be reversed when teachers understand their role in this process of change. The balance between the two, play settings and assessment, is important and necessary for changing the actual situation of the misunderstanding of concepts between both, play and assessment. We want both to be merged and worked together, instead of two strangers trying to prove each other wrong.
• Some teachers lack both the confidence and knowledge to create/adapt assessment for a play-based learning settings

• Teachers acknowledge that play-based learning pedagogy supports children’s rights, so they advocate the use of a more holistic approach for assessment. However, the path is still obscure.

Although teachers believe that; play-based learning provides opportunities to a more holistic learning and to know their students in more areas (e.g. social, academic, emotional), there is still (from a majority of professionals and institutions) little commitment in embarking in a journey of change and adaptation, where, for example, professional learning development to support educators to learn and develop confidence in their journey.

• Teachers find time and high student number to teacher ratios a barrier to assess learning equitably for all students

As the standardised tests are still, in most schools, the main tool to assess learning, teachers find themselves imprisoned in a circle of priorities; where they have to make choices between one or the other. The ideal, in my opinion, would be a natural blending; where assessment occurs throughout the process of teaching and learning and meaningfully.

• Advocating for formative assessment as well as standardised tests in the PBL environments. Are there benefits for both approaches?

• Teachers want to understand how to link the curriculum to observations about play.

• Teachers like the freedom and trust schools have placed in them as they trial play in their environments. Teachers believe that they can improve their own practices if they feel supported from senior management, colleagues, board of trustees and parents.

• Written observations, photographs, videos, learning stories and online reporting to communicate with parents keep that relationship close and working both ways. These strategies strengthened the relationship between PBL and assessment by making the learning visible.

• Listen and respond to students’ interests in a variety of ways and accordingly, modifying the strategies and environment on the way. This approach supports to maintain and prolong interest, to develop projects and as consequence; more opportunities to learn within and across different curriculum learning areas.

• Encourage and support student agency, allowing students to choose learning pathways

In a PBL setting the children have the power. They decide what and when to learn and the teacher is the scaffolder; the one who provides the ways to achieve the goals, all based in their observations, interactions, engagement and the knowledge acquired on the way.
Three aspects to acknowledge

An important learning found through this research, is that there are three main aspects we have to consider to make this relationship (play and assessment) workable. Teachers need to be aware and maintain an active position in these three components: teacher’s role, environment and assessment.

We want the teacher to:

- be aware of the range of types and purposes of assessments
- know the influence of the environment and the impact of relationships developed within these contexts, so they are able to make the best decisions about how to assess children’s learning
- listen and respond to students’ interests in a variety of ways and accordingly,
- create/ change/ adapt and apply the strategies necessary to each individual
- encourage, empower and support student agency, as this is a strong aspect of the play-based learning pedagogy
- know their role in the play environment

(MoE, 2017; Snow & van Hemel, 2008)

Teachers need to create an environment that:

- is brave and responsive to children’s needs (urges, interests, passions, heritages) providing the opportunities to learn, teach and assess
- creates strong relationships between people and things
- embraces meaningful learning

We need to understand assessment as a tool that supports teacher and student’s learning in different forms, such as:

- written observations
- photographs
- videos
- learning stories
- online and real-time reporting
- standardised and adapted tests
- writing (labels, notes, cards, stories etc)
- science reports
- math experiences etc
The picture below represents the cycle that I find is important and useful in a play environment.

As teachers observe (1) and analyse the children’s play/ experiences they gather information/ data (children’s interests, urges, physical, emotional and behavioral, developmental stages etc) that support 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. That gives the teacher the necessary information to apply the assessments (3) accordingly, responding (4) appropriately to each need and stages. This cycle shows 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.

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 embracing meaningful learning.

To illustrate how to marry assessment and PBL well, we can reflect on one example of a group of children exploring the arts learning area of the curriculum. Isaac, a five year old boy who has created an army of knights by making some puppets. He has 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 has gathered a new army of friends that have joined him through this journey.
This journey lasted one term (sadly interrupted by the covid-19 lockdown). During this time, Isaac and his friends learned new ways to communicate their ideas; to write texts and dialogs, to understand that there are different texts as they learned to write a play. During their writing sessions along with friends, they worked on understanding some basic grammatical rules, punctuation, text structures etc, as some examples of the academic learning.

Isaac and friends had many opportunities to work on the five key competencies from the New Zealand curriculum:

- Thinking
- Relating to others
- Using language, symbols, and texts
- Managing self
- Participating and contributing

(Is Ministry of Education, 2006)

Isaac and his army of friends, engaged in deep learning as they experienced learning through their own interests. They conquered the fear of speaking in front of an audience and prepared a puppet show.

As the project grew, 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.
The role of the teacher in this journey was as Loris Malaguzzi suggests:

“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, quoted in Rinaldi, 2006, p.89

In this case, the teacher observed with attention and 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 imagination and encouraged them to ask questions and find answers; to look for and find new goals through new strategies and by using their prior knowledge, encouraging their progress, supporting them in a respectful and trustful relationship. Student agency is primordial in this environment and teachers are required to understand, respect and know when and how to act.
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 evolving work of understanding how teachers work to assess learning through play is continuous. I hope that this journey continues to produce research in New Zealand and that the desire to find simple and practical ways of marrying assessment and play continues to grow. As teachers engage in this brave, responsive, complicated and yet beautiful journey, we hope to continue to learn and develop strategies that merge assessment into the play-based learning environments in ways that are respectful, responsive, valuable, meaningful and fun.
References


