

# Letter from the Waikato

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## Kia ora to our colleagues in e.c.e. centres

**Because 2016 is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Te Whāriki* and 12 years since the publication of the first 10 books of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2004), we have been reflecting on developments in teaching, particularly in assessment practices in early childhood services.**

From our observations and conversations with teachers during our regular practicum evaluative visits we hear disturbing news. Increasingly teachers are reporting that hard copies of children's portfolios are being phased out in favour of online ePortfolios using platforms such as Storypark or Educa. We have been discussing it in the corridors and the staffroom at our workplace, hence our motivation to write this letter to you.

As we have mulled over this growing phenomenon, a number of questions and issues have arisen for us. We are not arguing against ePortfolios *per se*, rather we are advocating for the continued provision of hard copy portfolios (alongside them). But we do encourage teaching teams who are thinking of discontinuing hard copy portfolios to think carefully about their decision to do so. Especially, we suggest that teaching teams explore the rationale behind the decision. Is it based on sound principles of sociocultural assessment practices? Is it a cost-driven decision? Or is there some other reason why teachers/managers think that this is a good choice they are making?

Portfolios are designed to be a record of a child's learning demonstrating progression and continuity. They generally contain narratives known as Learning Stories. Learning Stories document children's learning, intending to make visible significant aspects of children's learning as it occurs. Learning Stories contain feedback to children about their learning. They focus on skills, knowledge and attitudes that encourage learning dispositions and working theories. Learning Stories are based on the principles of formative assessment including: the provision of effective feedback; informing and forming teaching responses; the profound influence of assessment on children's motivation; acknowledgement of multiple cultural lenses; and the opportunity for revisiting and self-assessing (Wiliam, 2011; Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2004).

Easy access to portfolios enables young children the freedom to choose to revisit their record of learning and build their learner identity without adult facilitation. It

is crucial that children are enabled to 'read' their stories (from memory and/or through photographs), recount the strategies they used to accomplish something and talk to others about their learning.

These aspects help shape a positive learner identity and robust learning dispositions. Having hard copies of portfolios readily accessible and available to children fulfils aspects of formative assessment more effortlessly than via an electronic device that may not be easily accessed.

There are other significant reasons why retaining hard copies of portfolios is important, in our shared view. These reasons include:

- portfolios can provide a strong sense of belonging;
- equity of access for families who may not have technology readily available to them;
- the social aspects of sharing stories and talking about learning with interested others; and
- portfolios are powerful literacy artefacts (at a time when early literacy is a key social goal).

Infants and toddlers in particular can engage more easily with a hard copy portfolio. Perhaps you've seen this yourself? To visualise this, have a look at the image on page 139 of *Learning Stories: Constructing learner identities in early education* (Carr & Lee, 2012). This image shows three siblings ranging from a few months to approximately eight years lying on the floor all 'reading' and sharing their portfolios.

Another image in *Kei Tua o te Pae* Book 1 (Ministry of Education, 2004) shows a mother and baby looking at the infant's portfolio (p.3). These tangible artefacts provide opportunities for building identity, relationships and competence. The intimacy we see and feel viewing these images is based on the sharing, which we are doubtful would be easy to replicate with ePortfolios.

Hard copy portfolios are a valuable resource for children and families who have English as an additional language. Stories abound about how having a portfolio to carry around, refer to at every opportunity and share with others has been instrumental in a child's sense of belonging, and their successful transition into a new environment (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2009; Davis et al., 2015).

Possible ethical issues exist related to the ownership

of and purpose of ePortfolio platforms. The developers of ePortfolio platforms are business owners who provide resources for early childhood education. However unlike companies that market products for physical environments, providers of online assessment platforms can influence the ways in which assessment is documented. This is important. Although the online platform may be designed with the best intentions, unless there is a deep understanding of the pedagogy of formative assessment, the authenticity of thoughtfully capturing significant learning for a child is at risk. There is also the risk of 'standardised' assessment using online platforms where the analysis of learning comes from a drop-down menu rather than deep engagement with the learner.

There is more work to be done. So far research has largely focussed on parent/whānau engagement with ePortfolios (Goodman & Cherrington, 2015; Higgins, 2015; Hooker, 2015) with little exploration of the impact of ePortfolios on children. We concur with Goodman and Cherrington (2015) who suggest that further investigations are imperative including children's use of ePortfolios to revisit, communicate about and engage with their learning individually and collaboratively. After all, it is their assessment which needs to benefit their learning.

Ngā mihi nui,

*Janette Kelly and Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips*

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Photo courtesy of Dinsdale Kindergarten, Waikato Kindergarten Association

**Portfolios can provide a prompt for children's thinking – including their engagement with literacy practices such as intentional writing.**