Research summary

Australian Education Research Organisation

Assessment practices in early childhood education and care

November 2026

Assessment is an important part of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). It helps educators and teachers understand children's learning, development and wellbeing, and use this information to plan responsive teaching and learning experiences.

This research summary presents key findings from the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s systematic literature review on assessment practices in ECEC. It explains how educators and teachers understand assessment, the practices and tools they commonly use and the support they need to strengthen assessment quality across the sector.

Introduction

Assessment is a core component of quality ECEC, with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) V2.0 positioning it as an ongoing process of gathering and analysing evidence to inform planning for children's learning, development and wellbeing (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022). The framework doesn't prescribe specific methods, which both requires and enables educators to exercise professional judgement in context. However, research literature indicates that assessment in ECEC is complex, and alignment with the curriculum shapes how assessment is understood and enacted (McLachalan & McLaughlin, 2022). These challenges are intensified by perceived documentation and accountability pressures, growing interest in school readiness and measurable outcomes, the expansion of digital assessment tools, and expectations for culturally responsive and collaborative practice (Albin-Clark, 2021; Amukune et al., 2022; Armstrong, 2023; Stratigos & Fenech, 2021).

Barblett et al. (2021) noted that educators implementing the EYLF would like more examples of planning and assessment to support their decision-making, and that there is a need for development of tools and approaches that are suited to ECEC settings and educators. Together, these developments highlight the need to clarify how assessment is conceptualised and enacted in ECEC, and to identify evidence-informed directions for strengthening assessment quality.

AERO's literature review suggested that strengthening assessment quality in ECEC requires clearer support for educators to understand assessment purposes, interpret evidence and apply professional judgement in context. It synthesised contemporary literature to clarify how assessment is conceptualised and enacted, identify common practices and tools, and highlight directions for future research, policy and practice.

Research overview

AERO's literature review synthesised contemporary research on assessment practices in ECEC, with a focus on how assessment is conceptualised, enacted and supported in practice. The review examined literature published between 2020 and 2025, alongside key Australian policy and quality frameworks, to understand how educators use assessment practices, tools and professional judgement to support children's learning, development and wellbeing.

The review was guided by 3 research questions (RQs).

RQ1

How is assessment in ECEC currently conceptualised?

RQ2

What assessment practices and tools are commonly identified in ECEC research?

RQ3

What opportunities exist for future research, policy and practice?

Key findings

AERO's literature review identified 3 key findings:

- Assessment is integral to pedagogy – it isn't a discrete activity but is interconnected with pedagogical practices and serves multiple purposes.
- Assessment literacy is central to effective assessment practice.
- Assessment quality is shaped by workload, context and system expectations.

The following sections explain how assessment is conceptualised, enacted and supported within ECEC contexts.

Assessment as pedagogical practice

Assessment in ECEC is conceptualised as a set of pedagogical practices embedded within teaching, learning, planning and reflection. Consistent with the EYLF V2.0 (AGDE, 2022), it supports educators in understanding children's learning, development and wellbeing and making informed pedagogical decisions. Across the literature, assessment serves complementary purposes, including:

- informing teaching
- evaluating progress over time
- supporting children's participation in their own learning (DeLuca, Pyle, Valiquette et al., 2020).

High-quality assessment relies on educators selecting and combining practices in response to context, pedagogical intent and children's learning needs. Purposeful integration of different approaches enables a richer understanding of learning and supports collaboration with children, families and communities.

Defining assessment and assessment models

The EYLF V2.0 defines assessment as the ongoing process of gathering and analysing information about children's learning, development and wellbeing over time using a range of strategies to inform planning and support progression in learning (AGDE, 2022). Assessment is therefore conceptualised as an ongoing and cyclical process, rather than a single event. Importantly, the framework doesn't prescribe specific methods or tools, instead positioning educators as professional decision-makers who exercise judgement when selecting and enacting assessment practices.

The EYLF V2.0 identifies 3 assessment models:

- **Assessment for learning** focuses on generating evidence that informs pedagogy and planning.
- **Assessment of learning** involves making judgements about learning progress and achievement over time.
- **Assessment as learning** emphasises children's active participation in assessment and the development of self-regulation and metacognitive awareness.

Intentional teaching, learning and assessment

The literature positions assessment, teaching and learning as inseparable elements of effective pedagogy. Rather than an additional task, assessment provides evidence that informs planning, curriculum design and pedagogical interactions, helping educators build on children's strengths, interests and capabilities.

Effective intentional teaching requires educators to balance assessment for, of and as learning. This is particularly complex in play-based contexts, where assessment must be purposeful and responsive without disrupting the integrity of children's play.

Intersections between play and assessment

Play occupies a central position in ECEC pedagogy. Yet assessment has historically been viewed by some as being in tension with play, particularly when associated with academic, standardised or summative traditions. The literature reviewed challenges this perceived dichotomy, demonstrating that assessment can be meaningfully embedded within play-based learning. Assessment practices such as observation, pedagogical documentation, intentional teaching interactions and reflective dialogue can all occur within guided, free and teacher-supported play contexts.

Research suggests that play and assessment are best understood as continua rather than fixed categories. Frameworks developed by Pyle et al. (2020) show how learning goals, play contexts and assessment practices can be aligned while preserving play-based pedagogy. This requires careful planning and strong professional judgement.

Effective assessment relies on educator judgement and assessment literacy

A consistent finding across the literature is that the quality and effectiveness of assessment in ECEC is strongly influenced by educators' assessment literacy and professional judgement. While policy frameworks such as the EYLF V2.0 provide broad guidance regarding assessment purposes and expectations, they don't prescribe specific assessment methods or tools. Instead, educators are enabled and required to make informed decisions about which assessment practices and tools to use, how to interpret assessment evidence and how assessment information should inform teaching, learning and planning (AGDE, 2022).

The literature also identified a gap between educators' positive beliefs about assessment and their ability to enact it meaningfully in practice. Workload, time constraints, documentation requirements and uncertainty about assessment processes can limit analysis and use of evidence (Buldu & Şendil, 2023; DeLuca, Pyle, Braund et al., 2020; Grimmond et al., 2022; Lam & Wong, 2020).

Assessment literacy

Assessment literacy is conceptualised as more than technical knowledge of assessment processes. It encompasses educators' understanding of assessment purposes, their ability to collect, interpret and use evidence, and their confidence, beliefs, dispositions and professional identity as assessors. Across the literature review, differences in assessment quality were frequently linked to variation in educators' assessment literacy rather than the availability of assessment tools themselves.

Several studies identified challenges in educators' capability to analyse and interpret assessment evidence meaningfully, despite often collecting large amounts of documentation and assessment information (DeLuca, Pyle, Valiquette et al., 2020; Kervin et al., 2022; Will, 2022). Educators reported difficulty selecting appropriate assessment practices and tools, integrating multiple forms of assessment, analysing diverse sources of evidence, and using assessment information to support individual children's learning and development (Buldu & Şendil, 2023; DeLuca, Pyle, Valiquette, et al., 2020; Guarrella et al., 2023).

Professional learning, mentoring, collaboration and high-quality tools can strengthen assessment literacy. Studies of tools such as Observe Reflect Improve Children's Learning and Numeracy and Mathematics Block-Based Assessment found that structured assessment processes supported educator confidence, interpretation of evidence and understanding of children's learning (Elwick et al., 2023; Grimmond et al., 2022). However, tools are only effective when educators use them purposefully within each teaching and learning context.

A range of assessment approaches

The literature identified a range of assessment approaches – from holistic and narrative approaches such as observations, portfolios, Learning Stories and Floorbooks – to more structured standards-based assessment. No single approach or tool can capture the full complexity of children's learning, development and wellbeing. Stronger assessment practice requires educators to combine approaches purposefully in ways that are fit for purpose and contextually appropriate.

Holistic assessment

Holistic assessment is individualised, contextualised and strengths based. It aims to understand the whole child by considering learning, development and wellbeing in everyday ECEC settings, particularly through play, observation, documentation and reflection. Common examples include observations, portfolios, Floorbooks and Learning Stories.

While holistic practices support a whole-child view, they don't automatically provide comprehensive evidence across all developmental domains. Their value relies on clear purpose, quality analysis and educator judgement. Without these, assessment can remain descriptive rather than becoming meaningful assessment.

Standards-based assessment

Standards-based assessment involves planned and structured assessment activities linked to defined learning outcomes, developmental continua or criteria. In the Australian context, assessment practices under this approach are typically aligned with the EYLF V2.0 and jurisdictional frameworks such as the Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024). They support educators in making judgements about children's learning in relation to defined expectations, helping to identify progress, track development and inform decisions about learning support or intervention.

Standards-based assessment can make judgements more structured, consistent and communicable. However, if used narrowly, it may reduce learning to outcome tagging, overlook context or encourage deficit-oriented interpretations. It's strongest when combined with narrative and holistic evidence.

A combination of narrative and standards-based assessment

A growing area of practice is combining narrative and standards-based assessment practices to capture both processes and outcomes of learning. These combined practices provide richer, more valid representations of children's capabilities.

Standardised assessment

Standardised assessment is a more structured approach. It uses tools that are systematically administered and scored, and that are designed to measure academic readiness or specific domains of learning. These type of assessments have the potential to provide high levels of objectivity and support comparisons across populations. When used effectively, they have the potential to provide a consistent evidence base for population level decision-making.

The literature emphasised that educators need strong assessment literacy to use standardised tools appropriately. Challenges in interpreting results, alongside risks of misrepresentation and bias, can limit their usefulness for decision-making.

Assessment quality is shaped by context, workload and system expectations

Educators frequently experience assessment as time intensive and, at times, compliance driven. Workload, unclear guidance, limited professional learning and digital documentation demands can reduce the pedagogical value of assessment. However, when assessment is embedded within intentional teaching and supported by collaborative reflection, it can strengthen planning, responsiveness and children's learning experiences.

Assessment workload

Assessment workload emerged as a significant challenge. Educators reported difficulties managing the time required to collect, document, organise and analyse assessment information, particularly when using narrative tools such as Learning Stories (Cameron, 2022; Fabian, 2021; McLachlan & McLaughlin, 2022). When assessment becomes primarily associated with compliance and documentation, its pedagogical value can be diminished.

Collaboration

The literature increasingly conceptualises assessment as a collaborative process involving children, families, educators and communities. Multiple perspectives can enrich understandings of children's learning, support child agency, incorporate family knowledge and strengthen shared decision-making among educators.

However, collaboration isn't always fully realised. Child voice may be underrepresented, family involvement can be limited and organisational constraints can reduce educator collaboration. Effective collaboration requires supportive systems, shared understandings and intentional assessment practices.

Implications for policy and practice

AERO's literature review shows that high-quality assessment in ECEC requires educators to draw on varied models, practices and tools while exercising professional judgement. Assessment quality is shaped not only by educator capability, but also by workload, policy expectations, and available supports. The following key implications for the ECEC sector emerged through the review:

- **Take a balanced and integrated approach to assessment.** Provide clearer guidance to support balanced and integrated use of assessment practices and tools. This would support a broader understanding of what constitutes effective assessment, and support professional judgement about how to use it to respond to diverse contexts and children's needs.
- **Focus on capability, confidence and collaboration.** Stronger professional learning and mentoring to support educator confidence and capability in selecting appropriate practices, interpreting assessment data and aligning assessment with learning would strengthen assessment literacy in ECEC settings.

More attention should also be given to culturally responsive assessment – in particular First Nations-led approaches, meaningful child and family participation, effective use of digital technologies, and evidence linking assessment practices to children's outcomes.

More information

This research summary is part of a series of publications AERO has produced on assessment in ECEC, including:

Assessment Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review

Assessment for Children's Learning resource collection

Early Childhood Learning Trajectories

Conclusion

Overall, the literature indicated that high-quality assessment in ECEC relies on purposeful, balanced and contextually responsive use of assessment approaches. Strengthening assessment requires investment in educator capability, clearer system guidance and conditions that allow assessment evidence to inform teaching, learning and children's development.



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