

**Assessing Children's Learning in Early Childhood Education:
An Integrative Literature Review of Assessment and Documentation
Practices in Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how children's learning is assessed and documented in early childhood education (ECE) in Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand, as represented in policy, scholarship, and related documentary sources. Employing an integrative literature review supported by autoethnographic reflection, the study draws on my dual positioning as a former ECE methodologist in the Russian preschool sector and as a parent navigating the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE system, using this situated perspective as an interpretive and reflexive lens throughout.

The review addresses one primary research question and three supporting questions, asking what theoretical and pedagogical assumptions underpin assessment practices in each context, how national curricula and policy frameworks, including *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) and Russia's federal curriculum and policy frameworks, shape those practices, and what tensions, contrasts, and points of resonance emerge when the two systems are considered together.

The Russian system emerged from cultural-historical theory and federal standardisation into a framework, formalised through FGOS DO, FOP DO, and the 2023 methodological recommendations, that positions assessment as developmental and non-attestational at the policy level, while local institutional materials reveal a more structured enactment oriented towards school readiness and civic-value formation. The Aotearoa New Zealand system, in contrast, grew from the bicultural, sociocultural curriculum *Te Whāriki* into an approach centred on narrative documentation, most visibly through Learning Stories, that positions children as already competent and confident learners; the review also traces tensions around validity, dispositional narrowing, and political pressure on this non-prescriptive curriculum.

Brought into dialogue in a synthesis chapter, the two systems are found to share a theoretical ancestor in Vygotsky despite growing in markedly different directions, and each is found to make a particular kind of visibility possible at the expense of another: diagnostic assessment renders a system legible at the cost of the individual child, while narrative assessment renders each child's learning visible over time, without aiming to compare children with one another. Variability in assessment tools is present within both contexts, arising for structurally different reasons, the absence of a single mandated national assessment tool in one case and a deliberate philosophical non-prescription in the other. Whether national standardisation is desirable is itself contested, and is considered here in relation to children's rights.

The dissertation concludes that assessment is never a neutral technical exercise but is always an answer, however partial or unstated, to a prior question about what early childhood

education is for and whose interests it is ultimately designed to serve. A children's rights framework, such as the UNCRC (1989), is offered as one practical tool through which ECE leaders and policymakers in both contexts might evaluate their assessment practices against the child's right to full development. The dissertation contributes a transnational, autoethnographically informed perspective to a field in which Russian and Aotearoa New Zealand scholarship on ECE assessment has largely developed in isolation from one another, with implications for policymakers, ECE leaders, teachers, families, and future research.

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List of Acronyms

ECE	-	Early Childhood Education
FGOS DO	-	Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education
FOP DO	-	Federal Educational Programme for Preschool Education
ERO	-	Education Review Office
OECD	-	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNCRC	-	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive 'S' followed by a diagonal stroke, is written over the horizontal line of the 'Signed:' field.

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I am also deeply grateful to my children, whose own experiences of early childhood education, and whose childhoods more broadly, first motivated me to work in the ECE sector, to pursue further study in this field, and ultimately to undertake this dissertation.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband and my elder daughter for their support throughout this process. Their help gave me the time and space to immerse myself in reading and writing, and I could not have completed this dissertation without them.

This dissertation emerged from my lived experience as a newly arrived immigrant mother in Aotearoa New Zealand. Soon after our arrival my four-year-old daughter started kindergarten, and I began noticing small things: children choosing their own activity instead of everyone doing the same task at the same time, no fixed nap schedule, a teacher crouching down to ask my daughter what she wanted to do rather than telling her what came next.

Then came the Learning Stories: short, narrated accounts of things my daughter had done and noticed during her day at kindergarten, written for us to read at home.

I remember sitting with my husband one evening, reading aloud to him from one of the stories, about a game my daughter had played that day, and coming across a sentence she had put together herself, three English words, despite arriving at kindergarten with none. It was a small thing on the page, but it was the first time we saw her real progress written down, not as a score, but as a moment.

Over time, reading one story after another, I noticed just how different our two systems really were. That noticing is where this dissertation begins.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context of the study

Assessment and documentation of children's learning are not neutral practices. They reflect decisions, sometimes explicit and more often implicit, about what learning is, what childhood is for, and which aspects of a child's experience are worth recording. These decisions are shaped by history, by policy, and by theoretical traditions that differ significantly across national contexts. What counts as evidence of learning in one system may be invisible, or actively resisted, in another.

This dissertation examines those differences. It focuses on assessment practices in early childhood education (ECE) in two countries, Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand, and asks how children's learning is assessed and documented within each system, as represented in policy and academic literature. The two contexts are not an obvious comparative pair. They share no common language, no shared policy tradition, and no geographic proximity. What connects these two contexts is my position as a researcher who has experienced both, though from different positions: in Russia, as an ECE teacher and methodologist and as a parent; in Aotearoa New Zealand, as a parent of a child enrolled in an early childhood centre, not as a teacher. This asymmetry shapes what I am able to see in each context, and I return to it in the methodology and limitations sections. The questions that guide this study emerged only through that crossing.

Although assessment has been widely examined within both Russian and Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education, these two bodies of literature have largely developed independently. As a result, the assumptions underpinning assessment practices are often taken for granted within each national context. By bringing these two contexts into dialogue through a situated comparative lens, this dissertation seeks to make visible the underlying values, assumptions, and images of the child that shape assessment in each system.

The broader intellectual context for this study is an international conversation about the purposes of early childhood education and the role that assessment plays within it. Over the past three decades, comparative and cross-cultural research has consistently shown that assessment practices in ECE are embedded in assumptions about childhood that vary across cultural and national settings. These assumptions are rarely made explicit within any single system, precisely because they are so taken for granted (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006; Woodhead, 2006; Rogoff, 2003). Dahlberg et al. (2013) describe this as the problem of the "image of the child", where every pedagogical decision, including every decision about what to assess and how, rests on a prior, and usually unspoken, conception of what children are and what they are capable of. Whether a child is understood primarily as a

developing organism progressing through universal stages, as a future citizen to be shaped, or as a competent and rights-bearing person already engaged in meaningful learning, shapes the entire architecture of assessment practice within a system (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Peter Moss (2019), writing from within a reconceptualist tradition, has argued that early childhood education is always an ethical and political project, one that cannot be separated from broader questions about what kind of society we are building and what kind of person we are hoping to produce. In this framing, assessment is not a technical procedure that sits outside these questions about society and personhood; it is one of the primary ways in which systems answer them. To examine how a system assesses children's learning is, in effect, to examine what that system values, what it sees, and what it renders invisible.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) provides a further dimension to this inquiry. Article 29 affirms children's right to an education that supports their fullest development, intellectual, emotional, social, and cultural. Woodhead (2006) and Moss (2019) have both argued that assessment practices are themselves a rights question: they determine whose learning is recognised, whose capabilities are made visible, and whose ways of knowing are treated as significant. A cross-cultural examination of assessment does more than describe differences in professional practice. It raises questions about how different systems construct the child as a subject of education and, by implication, as a subject of rights.

1.2 The researcher's position

This study does not begin from a neutral vantage point. It begins from a specific one: I trained and worked as an early childhood educator in Russia, held a senior role responsible for assessment practice and curriculum consistency across a network of municipal preschools, and then moved to Aotearoa New Zealand, where my children attended early childhood settings shaped by an entirely different educational tradition.

That senior role in Russia, responsible for assessment practice and curriculum consistency across a network of municipal preschools, meant learning, in considerable detail, how assessment criteria were constructed, how they were applied, and what they were understood to measure. Arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand as a parent and encountering a system in which assessment looked entirely different, raised questions that my earlier professional training had not prepared me to ask. Not better or worse, but differently organised around different assumptions, different images of the child, and different systems of values and beliefs.

Each system, it turned out, offered its own answers to questions that neither had made explicit: what a child is, what learning is, and what assessment is for.

This dissertation grew from that encounter. The research questions I ask emerged not from the literature first, but from the experience of crossing between two systems, from different positions in each (as an educator and methodologist in Russia, and as a parent in Aotearoa New Zealand), and finding that the crossing made both of them strange. The literature came later, as a means of making sense of and critically examining what the experience had surfaced.

This positioning offers an insider, or emic, perspective in both contexts, but from different angles: in Russia as an educator and methodologist with detailed professional knowledge of the system, and in Aotearoa New Zealand as a parent, without experience of writing or interpreting Learning Stories as a teacher. It is therefore not a claim to authority. Living inside a system does not guarantee understanding of it, and personal experience can obscure as readily as it can illuminate (Ellis et al., 2011). What it does offer is a particular kind of attention: the capacity to notice what is taken for granted within each context, precisely because it was not taken for granted from the outside. It is this attention, to the assumed, the unspoken, and the structurally invisible, that the autoethnographic dimension of this study tries to make productive.

1.3 Research questions

This study is organised around one primary research question and three supporting questions. The primary question asks: how is children's learning assessed and documented in early childhood education in Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand, as represented in policy, scholarship, and related documentary sources?

Three supporting questions give this inquiry its shape:

- What theoretical and pedagogical assumptions underpin assessment and documentation practices in each context?
- How do national curricula and policy frameworks, specifically *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017), hereafter referred to as *Te Whāriki*, in Aotearoa New Zealand and federal curriculum and policy frameworks in Russia, shape approaches to assessing children's learning?
- What points of tension, contrast, and resonance emerge across the two contexts when assessment is viewed through a reflexive and cross-cultural lens?

Together, these questions move from description towards interpretation. They ask not only what assessment looks like in each system, but what assumptions it carries, and what those assumptions reveal when the two systems are placed in the same frame.

1.4 Methodology

This dissertation is a qualitative research project. It uses an integrative literature review as its primary research design, which serves both as the review of the literature and as the methodological process through which that literature is analysed and synthesised. The literature review is supported by autoethnographic reflection, which serves as an interpretive and reflexive lens throughout the study. Together, these approaches enable both a comparative analysis of policy and literature and a situated interpretation of the findings.

1.4.1 Integrative literature review

This study adopts an integrative literature review as its primary research design. An integrative literature review is a form of systematic inquiry that brings together diverse bodies of scholarship, including empirical research, theoretical texts, curriculum frameworks, and policy documents, to generate new understanding of a phenomenon across different contexts (Torraco, 2016). It is particularly well suited to a study that seeks to examine not only what assessment practices look like in each context, but what assumptions they carry and what values they enact.

Literature was identified through systematic searches of academic databases including ERIC, Scopus, and AUT Library resources, alongside targeted searches for curriculum documents, government and ministry publications, and sector reports from both countries. Search terms included “early childhood assessment”, “learning documentation”, “Learning Stories”, “formative assessment”, “early childhood curriculum”, and “preschool education”. Equivalent Russian-language search terms were used when searching Russian-language scholarship, policy, and curriculum documents. These included terms such as “*otsenka v doshkol'nom obrazovanii*” (assessment in preschool education), “*pedagogicheskaya diagnostika*” (pedagogical diagnostics), “*monitoring razvitiya detei*” (monitoring children's development), and “*doshkol'noe obrazovanie*” (early childhood education). Searches focused primarily on literature and policy published between 2001 and 2025, a period encompassing the consolidation and growing influence of Learning Stories in Aotearoa New Zealand and the major waves of curriculum reform in Russia, though a small number of foundational theoretical texts, including Vygotsky (1978, 1984) and Rogoff (2003), were included where they underpinned concepts used throughout the analysis.

Inclusion criteria prioritised sources focused on ECE assessment and documentation practices within, or directly relevant to, Aotearoa New Zealand or Russia. Sources concerned primarily with primary or secondary schooling, or that did not engage directly with assessment or documentation in early childhood contexts, were excluded. Sources were evaluated in relation to their relevance, authority, currency, and contextual contribution, with attention to the different purposes and evidential status of peer-reviewed scholarship, policy texts, theoretical literature, and local institutional documents. The final body of literature comprised 69 sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters, postgraduate research, curriculum and policy documents, sector and practitioner literature, national statistical and survey sources, and three unpublished local diagnostic and institutional documents obtained directly from a single municipal preschool organisation in the Moscow region. These documents were obtained and used with the permission of the organisation and are treated as localised illustrations of institutional assessment practice rather than as representative evidence of Russian ECE more broadly.

Analysis involved iterative reading, coding, and thematic synthesis of selected literature, consistent with integrative review methodology (Torraco, 2016). Coding was conducted manually through annotation and analytic notes on each source, without the use of qualitative data analysis software, and a spreadsheet was used to keep a record of the sources included in the review. Initial searches returned a substantially larger pool of results, which was narrowed through the inclusion and exclusion criteria described above and through iterative screening for direct relevance to ECE assessment and documentation. Initial coding focused on how children's learning was conceptualised within each source, how documentation was used pedagogically, and how national curricula and policy frameworks shaped assessment practices. Codes were then compared across the literature from Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand to identify recurring patterns, points of convergence and divergence, and broader comparative themes that informed the analysis presented in subsequent chapters. Four broad comparative themes emerged from this process and structure the synthesis in Chapter 4. The first concerns the image of the child that each system assumes and constructs (Section 4.2). The second concerns what each approach to assessment makes visible, and what it leaves less visible (Section 4.3). The third concerns the different reasons for which assessment varies across and within the two systems (Section 4.4). The fourth concerns the political and cultural context as a shaping force on assessment practice (Section 4.5). Together, these themes inform the closing discussion of what assessment is for, and what early childhood education is for (Section 4.6). This process involved identifying dominant discourses, theoretical orientations, and pedagogical assumptions across both bodies of literature before engaging in comparative analysis to explore points of convergence, divergence,

and productive tension. Peer-reviewed and book-length scholarship supplied the theoretical and comparative framing, curriculum and policy documents provided the formal structure of each system, and the institutional diagnostic materials offered a ground-level view of assessment practice not captured in published policy alone. Autoethnographic reflection also informed interpretation throughout the comparative analysis by helping to identify culturally embedded assumptions and critically examine similarities and differences across the two assessment traditions.

1.4.2 Autoethnography and reflexivity

Alongside the integrative literature review, this dissertation draws on autoethnographic reflection as an analytic lens. Autoethnography is an approach that uses the researcher's own cultural experience to illuminate broader social and institutional practices (Ellis et al., 2011). It does not treat personal experience as anecdotal evidence to be set aside before the real analysis begins. It treats it as a legitimate methodological resource, one that can surface assumptions embedded so deeply in a system that they become visible only when encountered from the outside.

In this study, autoethnographic reflection takes the form of short vignettes that precede each substantive chapter and draw on my experiences first as an ECE practitioner in Russia and later as a parent in Aotearoa New Zealand. The vignettes are not presented as representative evidence about either ECE system. Rather, they function as situated autoethnographic material that provides an interpretive opening into the questions explored through the literature review, making visible cultural assumptions that the subsequent analysis examines. Each reflective piece opens up themes explored in the literature rather than standing apart from them.

The vignettes were written from memory rather than from contemporaneous field notes or a research diary, drawing on moments that had remained vivid enough, across time, to still carry analytic weight. Early drafts were revised more than once as the literature review developed, with some material reworded, or moved to different chapters, as it became clearer which moments belonged to methodological framing and which belonged to the eventual synthesis in Chapter 4. Read together, these vignettes surfaced questions that shaped the direction of the literature review itself: questions about how each system imagines the child, what kinds of learning are rendered visible through assessment, how curriculum and assessment relate to one another, and what purpose early childhood education is ultimately understood to serve.

This approach requires transparency about my position as researcher, and that transparency is itself a methodological commitment. Moss (2019) has argued that

acknowledging positionality is not a concession to subjectivity but an act of intellectual honesty. All research is conducted from somewhere. Naming that somewhere makes the analysis more rigorous, not less. My position differs across the two contexts: in Russia, I was both an educator and methodologist with professional knowledge of the system and a parent, whereas in Aotearoa New Zealand I am a parent rather than a teacher. This position shapes what I notice, what surprises me, and how I read the literature. That shaping is not bracketed out of the analysis. It is acknowledged and engaged with throughout.

The vignettes do not stand in for empirical data about other practitioners or families. Their function is analytic and interpretive: they bring a situated perspective to the reading of literature and policy, helping to identify points of contrast, resonance, and culturally embedded assumptions that a more distanced approach might not surface.

To protect my children's privacy, their names and other identifying details have been removed or adapted throughout the dissertation, and identifiable photographs have not been included.

1.4.3 Limitations

This study carries several limitations that are worth naming directly.

The integrative literature review is necessarily bounded by the sources included, and the selection of literature reflects choices about what to foreground. Those choices were made carefully and systematically, but they were not made from outside the field. A researcher with a different background, or a different set of questions, might have assembled a different body of literature and reached different conclusions. This is not a weakness unique to this study. It is a condition of all interpretive research, and acknowledging this is part of what makes the analysis honest.

A second limitation concerns language. The inclusion of Russian-language sources strengthens the representativeness of the literature drawn on in Chapter 2, but it also creates an asymmetry. Readers without Russian will not be able to engage directly with those sources, and the translations and summaries provided here necessarily involve interpretive choices. Where Russian terminology carries meanings that do not translate cleanly into English, this is noted and explained in the relevant sections.

A third limitation concerns the autoethnographic dimension of the study, which introduces subjectivity. This is acknowledged throughout and treated as an analytic resource rather than a methodological problem. Whilst personal experience can illuminate assumptions that more distanced methods might miss, it can also reproduce blind spots that the researcher is

not aware of (Ellis et al., 2011). The complexity of my own positioning, which combines professional insider knowledge in one context with a parent's perspective in the other, is itself one such potential blind spot, and is considered further below. The vignettes and reflective passages in this dissertation have been written with that risk in mind, and with the understanding that they offer one perspective, not a comprehensive account.

A fourth limitation concerns the asymmetry of my positioning across the two contexts. In Russia, I was both a parent and an educator and methodologist responsible for assessment practice; in Aotearoa New Zealand, my position is that of a parent only, and I have not worked as a teacher or written Learning Stories in practice. My understanding of Learning Stories, and of the everyday professional judgement involved in them, is therefore shaped by the literature and by a parent's view rather than by teaching experience. As a result, the crossing between the two systems may have been explored in greater depth from the Russian side. Close engagement with the scholarship on Learning Stories in Aotearoa New Zealand is one way this has been addressed, but it cannot replace practitioner experience.

Finally, this study does not aim to produce generalisable claims about ECE assessment across all Russian or Aotearoa New Zealand settings. The literature reviewed represents the dominant policy frameworks and scholarly conversations in each context, but both systems are diverse, and local practice does not always reflect national policy. The conclusions drawn here are offered as critically informed interpretations, not as definitive descriptions of either system.

1.5 Overview of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured across three substantive chapters, framed by this introduction and a concluding discussion. This chapter has set the scene for the comparative study that follows: it has situated the inquiry within international debates about the purposes of early childhood education and assessment, outlined my position as the researcher and the questions that grew from it, and set out the integrative literature review and autoethnographic methodology that shape the chapters ahead.

Chapter 2 examines assessment and documentation practices in early childhood education in Russia. It traces the development of assessment policy from the pre-2013 period through to the present, paying particular attention to the influence of federal educational standards and the political context in which they were shaped. It draws on publicly available policy documents alongside locally developed institutional materials accessed directly through a municipal preschool organisation in the Moscow region, and considers what image of the child, and what

underlying values and assumptions, are constructed through the assessment frameworks that emerge from this policy landscape.

Chapter 3 turns to Aotearoa New Zealand. It examines the curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) and the assessment practices that have developed within it, including Learning Stories, portfolios, and narrative documentation. It considers both the strengths of this approach and the tensions and critiques that have emerged in the scholarly literature, including questions of validity, the risks of a single method dominating an entire sector, and the pressures of a changing political context.

Each substantive chapter is preceded by a short autoethnographic vignette drawn from my experiences first as an ECE practitioner in Russia and later as a parent in Aotearoa New Zealand. These vignettes do not summarise what follows. Rather, they provide a situated interpretive perspective that opens up the questions explored in each chapter.

The concluding chapter brings the two contexts into dialogue. It draws on the comparative and autoethnographic threads running through the dissertation to examine what becomes visible when these two systems are placed in the same frame, what they share, where they diverge, and what questions they raise for each other about what early childhood assessment is ultimately for.

Russia

The day I became methodologist, I was handed a folder.

A methodologist, in the Russian preschool system, is something like a curriculum coordinator: the person responsible for ensuring that assessment practices and educational standards are consistent across every group, in every building. My job, I was told, was to make sure the system held together. That every child, by the end of each academic year, had been assessed against the same indicators and found to be progressing along the same trajectory.

Before becoming a methodologist, I had been a teacher in that same network. I had sat on the floor with children. I had watched them for hours and learned what they were interested in, what made them stop and stare, what made them frustrated or bold. None of that was in the folder.

What was in the folder was a grid.

It covered five educational domains. Each domain had sub-indicators. Each sub-indicator had a score from one to five. Twice a year, every teacher in every group sat down and filled in the grid for every child. The averages were calculated. The results were compiled. Reports went up the chain.

My daughter was in one of those groups. She attended one of the kindergartens in the same network where I now worked.

I remember looking at her assessment card one afternoon. Not as her mother, but as the person responsible for the methodology. The scores were there: fine motor skills, cognitive development, social behaviour, knowledge of civic symbols. They were reasonable scores. They were probably accurate, in the sense that they corresponded to something real.

But they were the same kind of scores as every other child's card. The same categories, the same scale, the same structure, applied to every three-year-old, every four-year-old, every child in every group in the network, regardless of who they were or what they brought with them. The form did not have space for what made a child particular. It had space for what made a child measurable.

I understood why. A large system needs the same criteria in every group, or it cannot hold together. It needs numbers that can be set side by side, so that someone can see where support is needed and plan for it. In a national system spanning thousands of kindergartens and millions of children, a methodology that could not scale was not a methodology at all.

But I also understood, for the first time, what was not in the folder. And it was not the methodologist in me who saw it. It was the mother.

Chapter 2: Assessment Practices in Early Childhood Education in Russia

This chapter examines early childhood education in the Russian Federation, with a focus on its policy framework, curriculum structure, and assessment practices. It draws on federal policy documents, practitioner literature, and locally developed diagnostic tools from a municipal preschool organisation in the Moscow region. Those diagnostic materials are not publicly available; they were accessed directly through the organisation and are used here as concrete evidence of how federal requirements translate into institutional practice.

One contextual detail is worth noting for readers coming to the Russian system from elsewhere. In Russia, compulsory schooling begins at age seven, later than in Aotearoa New Zealand, where children typically start school at five. This means that the preschool period is longer, the regulatory framework surrounding it is more elaborately developed, and the question of what children should know and be able to do before school entry carries particular weight.

The chapter begins with an overview of how the Russian preschool system is organised and who it serves. It then traces the development of assessment policy from the pre-2013 period through to the present, paying particular attention to how the political context, especially the significant geopolitical shift of 2022, shaped curriculum and assessment reform. The chapter then turns to the relationship between curriculum content, diagnostic criteria, and the normative image of the child that assessment materials collectively construct. It closes by examining the tensions between how assessment is officially framed and how it operates in practice.

2.1 The Russian ECE Context

In the Russian Federation, early childhood education (ECE) is formally recognised as the first level of the national education system. Federal Law No. 273 *On Education in the Russian Federation* (2012) states that the education system includes preschool education, primary general education, basic general education, and secondary general education (Russian Federation, 2012). This means that preschool education is positioned as an educational stage within the wider national system. Article 64 of Federal Law No. 273 (2012) further defines preschool education as supporting children's physical, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and personal development, as well as the formation of prerequisites for learning activity and the protection of children's health (Russian Federation, 2012).

The main provision for preschool-aged children is through state and municipal institutions, and official Rosstat (the Federal State Statistics Service of Russia) data show that preschool education in Russia remains a mass national system enrolling millions of children

(Rosstat, 2025). A private sector does exist, but its role remains comparatively small. The dominance of the state sector is also connected to the question of cost. State and municipal kindergartens in Russia are not entirely free of charge; however, parental fees are regulated by regional authorities and partially compensated through a federal subsidy system, making them accessible to the majority of families. Private kindergartens, by contrast, operate on a commercial basis and charge significantly higher fees, which limits their reach to higher-income households. This cost differential helps explain why the private sector accounts for only 1.6% of total enrolment despite the growing demand for alternative educational provision.

According to Rosstat (2025), a total of 6.385 million children were enrolled in preschool organisations in Russia in 2024. Of these, approximately 6.281 million attended state and municipal institutions, while around 104 thousand were enrolled in private, or commercial, kindergartens. This amounted to 98.4% and 1.6% of total enrolment respectively (BusinesStat, 2025).

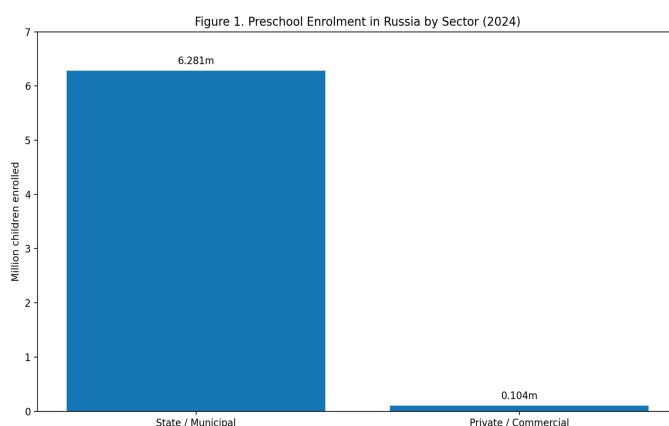


Figure 1

Preschool enrolment in Russia by sector (2024).

Based on BusinesStat (2025), using Rosstat data.

These figures highlight the continuing central role of the state in the provision of preschool education. Unlike some national ECE systems in which private providers occupy a substantial share of the sector, the Russian model remains largely centred on public kindergarten infrastructure. For this reason, state and municipal settings form the principal context for this study of assessment practice, while the private sector is treated as smaller, potentially more flexible, but less representative of the system as a whole.

In recent years, however, statistics point to a significant decline in preschool enrolment. The number of children enrolled fell from 7.443 million in 2020 to 6.385 million in 2024 (Rosstat, 2025). This decline is visible across both public and commercial sectors and reflects broader demographic trends, most notably a sustained fall in birth rates rather than reduced demand for preschool services (HSE University, 2024).

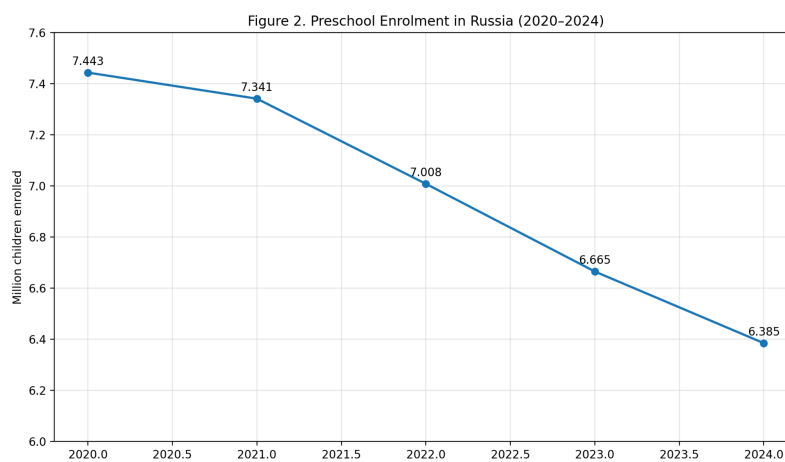


Figure 2

Preschool enrolment in Russia, 2020–2024 (million children). Based on federal statistical monitoring form No. 85-K (Rosstat, 2025).

At the same time, access to preschool education, meaning the availability of a funded place within a state or municipal institution, remains very high. According to the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, by the beginning of 2025 the availability of preschool education for children aged from two months to seven years and older had reached 99.83% (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2025).

Overall, preschool education in Russia is a large-scale, predominantly state-run system with formal status as the first level of the national education system. State and municipal settings form the primary context for this study; the private sector, while present, is small and less representative of the system as a whole.

2.2 Policy Framework: Assessment in Russian ECE

2.2.1 Pre-2013 Period

Prior to 2013, Russian preschool education was governed by two Federal State Requirements (FGT): Order No. 655 (2009), which specified requirements for the structure of

the core educational programme, and Order No. 2151 (2011), which established requirements for the conditions of its delivery (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2009, 2011). These requirements were mandatory for all state and municipal preschool institutions across the Russian Federation. Order No. 655 required each institution to develop an educational programme structured around ten areas of child development, including physical, cognitive, communicative, and social development. Monitoring of children's progress was conducted twice a year, tracking developmental outcomes against age-based benchmarks.

Under this framework, assessment was not explicitly designated as a policy area in its own right. Instead, it was integrated into broader practices such as pedagogical observation, diagnostic assessment of child development, and evaluation of children's readiness for school. The policy focus was on age-appropriate development, basic skill mastery, and social adjustment, with assessment serving primarily as a tool for programme planning rather than individual child evaluation.

To understand this framework, it is necessary to situate it within its broader socio-political context. Following the turbulence of the 1990s, the 2000s in Russia were characterised by renewed state investment in public institutions and a growing emphasis on national cohesion and state-directed development. During this period, education policy reflected a concerted effort to standardise and regulate preschool provision across a highly diverse national territory. Childhood was understood primarily in developmental-readiness terms: the preschool period was treated as preparation for school, and children were expected to acquire a defined set of competencies before entry into formal education. Assessment accordingly served a gatekeeping and monitoring function, measuring children's progress against age-based norms and ensuring institutional compliance with federal requirements.

At the same time, Russian preschool education has long been shaped by the cultural-historical theory of Lev Vygotsky, which emphasised child development as a socially mediated process that cannot be reduced to the accumulation of isolated skills (Vygotsky, 1984). Play, social interaction, and developmental stages were foregrounded as central educational values. Semenova et al. (2021) argue that, in practice, the influence of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory was uneven. Many preschool educators demonstrated only a partial understanding of core Vygotskian concepts, and the gap between official discourse and everyday practice remained significant.

This tension between a standardised, benchmark-driven monitoring system and a theoretically child-centred educational tradition formed the central challenge of the pre-2013 period. The 2013 Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education (FGOS DO)

sought to address it directly. Its aim was not to start from scratch, but to resolve these underlying contradictions (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013).

2.2.2 2013 FGOS DO (Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education)

FGOS DO, introduced in 2013, marked a significant shift in how the Russian state understood early childhood. International discourse on child rights and developmentally appropriate practice, alongside domestic critiques of the overly prescriptive pre-2013 system, pushed policymakers to reposition the preschool period as a stage of intrinsic value. It was no longer to be treated merely as a precursor to schooling. In this framing, childhood was a distinct and protected phase of life. This had direct implications for assessment: if childhood had value in itself, measuring children against standardised outcomes became philosophically problematic, and FGOS DO responded by formally rejecting direct evaluation of children's developmental benchmarks.

2.2.2.1 Key policy shifts and teaching principles

FGOS DO moved away from the pre-2013 focus on programme content and delivery conditions, and instead defined quality in terms of the conditions for children's upbringing, the richness of the developmental environment, and the quality of interaction between adults and children (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013). This was not simply an administrative change. It reframed what preschool education was for.

The standard specified a number of child-centred principles: recognition of the unique value of childhood, respect for individual uniqueness, support for children's initiative, cooperation between children and adults, and the organisation of learning through forms natural to the preschool period, including play, inquiry, and exploration (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013). This marked a clear departure from the pre-2013 emphasis on skill acquisition, school readiness, and standardised benchmarks.

2.2.2.2 Assessment

Before examining assessment under FGOS DO, it is worth pausing on what the term '*pedagogical diagnostics*' means in the Russian preschool context, since it appears throughout this chapter. Pedagogical diagnostics refers to the systematic, professionally structured observation and documentation of children's development, used by educators as a basis for planning and adapting their practice. It is not a standardised test. It is an ongoing professional process conducted within the preschool setting, and this distinction matters for understanding how assessment operates under the Russian regulatory framework.

FGOS DO formally rejected direct assessment of children's target benchmarks (*tselevye orientiry*) - defined as socially normalised, age-related indicators of children's possible achievements. The standard established that these benchmarks cannot be directly assessed, including through pedagogical diagnostics and monitoring, and cannot be used to compare children. Interim or final attestation is not permitted; no formal examination, grading, or certification of individual outcomes is allowed at the preschool level (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2013).

These provisions explicitly separated preschool education from the accountability model of the school sector. FGOS DO framed this separation as a philosophical commitment: protecting childhood as a distinct stage of life, rather than treating it as preparation for school.

Whilst assessment was not abolished, its purpose was fundamentally redefined. Pedagogical observation and documentation of children's individual development remained part of professional practice, provided they were used for educational planning and adapting the learning environment. FGOS DO consequently created a hybrid model: formal attestation was prohibited, whilst pedagogical diagnostics and professional observation were endorsed as legitimate components of practice. This tension between anti-formal policy and structured developmental monitoring became a defining feature of Russian preschool assessment and the starting point for further reforms.

2.2.3 2022 FOP DO (Federal Educational Programme for Preschool Education)

FOP DO, introduced in December 2022, cannot be understood in isolation from the wider legislative context of that year. In September 2022, the government adopted Federal Law No. 371-FZ, which mandated unified federal educational programmes across all levels of schooling, and FOP DO was part of this legislative move. Its stated goals explicitly included the formation of a content core oriented towards traditional spiritual, moral, and sociocultural values, and the establishment of equal educational conditions regardless of region (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022). Read alongside Federal Law No. 371-FZ, these goals suggest a broader move towards curriculum centralisation and national cohesion during this period, with education policy positioned as a vehicle for shared value formation across the federation. Preschool education, though it falls outside compulsory schooling, was not exempt from this wider shift towards unified educational content.

FOP DO did not replace FGOS DO. Where FGOS DO had established a philosophical framework, FOP DO specified content. It translated the 2013 standard's broad principles into a detailed national programme, compulsory across the sector, aimed at securing a unified federal educational space (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022).

One significant structural change concerned programme composition. Each preschool organisation's educational programme was required to align with FOP DO for at least 60% of its content, while locally developed content could account for no more than 40% and could not fall below the federal level of expectations (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022). This considerably narrowed the space for institutional autonomy.

In terms of assessment, FOP DO retained the anti-testing language of FGOS DO. *Planned results*, the term used throughout the document, refers not to grades or scores, but to descriptive statements of what children are expected to know, be able to do, and value by the end of preschool. The programme stated that no specific achievements could be demanded from preschool children, since children develop at different rates (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022). Formal testing and attestation remained formally prohibited.

In practice, however, FOP DO strengthened outcome guidance by specifying developmental expectations in considerably more detail than FGOS DO had done. Assessment was becoming more structured, even if the language used to describe it was not. The 2022 reform is therefore best understood as re-centralisation: the anti-testing stance remained formally intact, whilst state influence over curriculum content and expected results grew noticeably stronger.

The political dimension of this shift is significant. Under FOP DO, preschool education became more explicitly tied to civic and political formation. The programme linked early childhood education to the cultivation of patriotism, attachment to the homeland, historical memory, respect for family, and the preservation of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values. These were not supplementary elements; they were presented as foundational goals of preschool education. The question of what place politics occupies in education was, by 2022, answered clearly at the level of federal policy: a central one.

2.2.4 2023 adjustments: alignment of FGOS DO with FOP DO and tightening of implementation guidance

The year 2023 brought not a new standard, but a clarification of how FOP DO was to work in practice. In August 2023, the Ministry of Education issued Letter No. 03-1321, which circulated methodological recommendations for planning and delivering educational activities in preschool organisations in line with FOP DO (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2023). Where FOP DO had established a unified federal programme, the 2023 recommendations told practitioners how to use it in daily work - how to plan educational activities, interpret expected developmental outcomes, organise the learning environment, and, crucially, how to conduct pedagogical diagnostics. Pedagogical diagnostics itself was not new; it had been part of

professional practice since FGOS DO. What 2023 added was practical shape: concrete guidance on methods, timing, and documentation.

These changes have had significant implications for assessment. The document reaffirms continuity with FGOS DO: target benchmarks are not subject to direct evaluation, cannot be used to compare children, and do not form the basis for formal attestation. Completion of the preschool programme continues to involve no interim or final examination of children (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2023).

The 2023 recommendations provide considerably more practical detail on how pedagogical diagnostics should be conducted. Each preschool organisation determines the frequency of diagnostics in its own educational programme, with entry diagnostics at the beginning of a child's attendance and final diagnostics at the end of each developmental stage identified as the optimal model. **The preferred methods include** observation, informal conversations with children, analysis of children's work, and structured diagnostic tasks. **Observation is identified as the leading approach** (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2023). The results of diagnostics are used to individualise education and adjust planning, rather than for formal reporting or comparison between children.

Overall, 2023 is best understood as a year of operationalisation. The anti-formal logic of FGOS DO and FOP DO was not abandoned; it was made more practical, specified, and manageable for everyday use.

2.2.5 Present system (2025/2026)

Currently, the Russian preschool assessment system operates through the combined framework of FGOS DO, FOP DO, and the 2023 methodological recommendations. The state continues to reject, at the level of written policy, the direct evaluation of target benchmarks, formal comparison between children, and any form of attestation in preschool education. Preschool education itself remains a high state priority: by late 2024, the Ministry of Education reported availability of funded places at 99.77% for children from two months to seven years, and in December 2025 declared 2026 the Year of Preschool Education (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024, 2025).

In practice, however, evidence suggests that implementation of this anti-testing stance has been uneven. A 2021 national survey of 1,037 preschool educators found that 47% reported difficulties transitioning to child-centred practice under FGOS DO, with 22% indicating that they did not fully understand how to implement its requirements in daily work (VCIOM, 2021). The diagnostic materials collected for this study provide a concrete local example of how federal

policy may be translated into institutional practice. It should be noted that such materials are not publicly available; the diagnostic forms drawn on in this study were accessed directly through a municipal preschool organisation and are therefore not representative of a national standard. Whilst they illuminate how assessment operates at the institutional level in this particular setting, they cannot be generalised to preschool practice across Russia as a whole. The forms examined reveal structured assessment tools in which individual children are rated on a 1-5 scale across all educational areas twice per year. These materials demonstrate that formal monitoring of developmental outcomes occurred within this municipal preschool organisation, despite the official prohibition on direct evaluation (Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino, 2025).

The civic and political dimension of the present system is also significant. FOP DO frames preschool education explicitly in relation to the formation of the child as both a person and a citizen, linking it to patriotism, historical memory, attachment to the homeland, and the preservation of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values. The diagnostic materials collected for this study also reflect this pattern. The locally developed assessment forms include dedicated sections on civic and patriotic formation alongside developmental indicators across all five educational areas. The political context that shaped FOP DO in 2022 continues to shape what is assessed and how.

Overall, the present-day Russian preschool assessment system combines anti-testing rhetoric with increasingly specified federal guidance over curriculum content, developmental expectations, and value formation. It does not rely on formal testing, but it is not assessment-free either. Its central tension, between the formal rejection of direct evaluation and the possibility that structured monitoring of children's development and civic formation may nevertheless occur in institutional practice, is examined in more detail in Section 2.4.

2.3 Curriculum, Assessment Criteria, and the Normative Image of the Child

The materials reviewed in this section fall into two categories. The first consists of publicly available federal policy documents: FOP DO and the 2023 methodological recommendations. The second consists of locally developed institutional documents: diagnostic forms, curriculum plans, and matrices of educational events. Such materials are working documents developed by preschool organisations for internal use; they are not publicly available and are not centrally archived. The documents drawn on here were accessed directly through Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino (2025), and represent the practice of one municipal organisation in the Moscow region. They are used not as a nationally representative

sample, but as concrete evidence of how federal requirements translate into everyday practice at the institutional level. It is on the basis of these materials that the analysis and conclusions in this section are drawn.

Taken together, these documents suggest that contemporary Russian preschool education rests on a close relationship between curriculum content, pedagogical diagnostics, and a broader normative image of what the child should become. Assessment in this context is not a neutral or technical procedure. It reflects ideas about what children should become, what role the state plays in their development, and what purposes preschool education serves.

2.3.1 Curriculum and local planning

FOP DO establishes a unified federal content core and sets common requirements for the content and planned results of preschool education (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022). Each preschool organisation is required to develop its own educational programme on the basis of FOP DO, adapting federal content to local conditions while retaining the mandated outcomes. Local planning documents, including curriculum plans, thematic content maps, and diagnostic materials, then translate these federal outcomes into institutional practice.

Two types of local planning documents are particularly relevant here. The first is the regional component (*regional'nyi komponent*), a monthly curriculum plan that connects federal educational goals to local and national themes. The plan reviewed from Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino (2025) is based on the programme *Ia liubliu Rossiyu* [I Love Russia] and organises content across the academic year in a sequence moving from the local to the national. For example, September is dedicated to Pushkino as the child's "small homeland" (*malaya rodina*) (Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino, 2025, p. 3); November involves a retelling of a Soviet-era story about a child hero who dies defending his homeland; February is devoted to defenders of the Fatherland; May centres on the Immortal Regiment (*Bessmertnyi polk*), the annual commemorative march for victims of the Second World War.

The second is the matrix of educational events, also reviewed from the same organisation (*matritsa vospitatel'nykh sobytii*), a planning document that schedules activities tied to nationally significant dates throughout the year. Events with a designated patriotic direction include the Day of National Unity, the Day of the Unknown Soldier, the Day of Heroes of the Fatherland, the Day of the Lifting of the Siege of Leningrad, the Day of the Soviet Victory at Stalingrad, the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland, and Victory Day. Together, these locally developed documents show that, within this municipal preschool organisation, civic content is systematically embedded in annual preschool planning.

2.3.2 Assessment criteria and the diagnostic form

The diagnostic form used by Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino (2025) applies a five-point scale twice a year, at the beginning and end of the academic year, with average scores calculated for each child and for each assessment parameter. Criteria are organised across five educational areas: social-communicative, cognitive, speech, artistic-aesthetic, and physical development, and it is these criteria that then inform pedagogical diagnostics throughout the year.

The content of these criteria is particularly revealing. They do not focus only on cognitive, linguistic, and physical development. Within the social-communicative domain, for example, this diagnostic form assesses children's ability to name three or more landmarks of their home city - a criterion that directly corresponds to the September topic in the regional curriculum plan. Within the cognitive domain, the form assesses whether children can recognise state symbols, identify the capital of the Russian Federation, and demonstrate elementary knowledge of the army, soldiers, and armaments. These are not isolated indicators. They form part of a structured assessment matrix applied systematically across the academic year.

Uruntaeva and Gosheva (2017) distinguish between two forms of assessment documentation in Russian preschool practice: observational diaries, in which teachers record children's behaviour in unstructured form, and standardised development maps (*karty razvitiya*) that allow teachers to record children's progress against predefined criteria. The diagnostic form reviewed here corresponds to the latter category. It would therefore be inaccurate to suggest that Russian preschool education lacks assessment criteria. Such criteria exist, but they are implemented through locally developed diagnostic tools rather than a single national standardised procedure.

2.3.3 The normative image of the child

Across these curriculum documents, local planning materials, and diagnostic forms, a broader normative image of the child emerges - that is, the implicit model of what the child should be becoming, as constructed by these curriculum, planning, and diagnostic materials, and against which development is documented and tracked over time. This image is not stated in any one place, but it is visible across the materials as a whole. The image of the child constructed across the federal and local documents examined is socially organised, emotionally regulated, communicative, safe in behaviour, respectful of norms, knowledgeable about the local and national community, and prepared for further education. Chernyaeva (2022) supports this interpretation, situating preschool socialisation within what she terms *controlled socialisation* - the intentional, institutionally organised process of value formation that takes place through

preschool education. Malakhova et al. (2024) similarly argue that civic and patriotic formation is both pedagogically legitimate and important within the current federal framework.

This does not mean that the diagnostic materials examined directly assess patriotism as such, or at all in any explicit form. Rather, they suggest that pedagogical diagnostics operates within an educational environment in which desirable child development includes civic, moral, and socially approved orientations. The patriotic and civic dimension is not background rhetoric. It is part of the normative context within which developmental monitoring takes place.

Overall, the documents reviewed suggest that developmental monitoring, school-readiness expectations, social regulation, and civic-value formation are closely connected within the federal policy framework and the local assessment practices examined. Assessment criteria exist, but not as a single national standardised procedure; they appear to be implemented through locally developed diagnostic tools that reflect federal planned outcomes. Within the materials reviewed, the child is defined not only in terms of individual growth, but also in terms of socially appropriate, morally regulated, and civically oriented development.

2.4 Assessment in Practice: Tensions, Disjunctures, and Strengths

2.4.1 Tensions and disjunctures

The materials reviewed point to a potential disjuncture between the official framing of Russian preschool assessment and its enactment within the municipal organisation examined. Federal policy presents assessment as supportive and non-attestational, while the local assessment materials examined rely on structured rating scales, detailed criteria, and repeated documentation. This section explores that potential disjuncture in greater detail.

Муниципальное бюджетное общеобразовательное учреждение г. Пушкино Городского округа Пушкинский Московской области «Средняя общеобразовательная школа № 7»										Оценка педагогического процесса связана с уровнем овладения каждым ребёнком необходимым навыками и умениями по образовательным областям:									
										*низкий уровень — 1 балл — ребёнок не может выполнить все параметры оценки, помощь взрослого не принимает;									
										*низко-средний уровень — 2 балла — ребёнок с помощью взрослого выполняет некоторые параметры оценки;									
										*средний уровень 3 балла ребёнок выполняет все параметры оценки с частичной помощью взрослого;									
										*средне-высокий уровень 4 балла ребёнок выполняет самостоятельно и с частичной помощью взрослого все параметры оценки;									
										*высокий уровень 5 баллов ребёнок выполняет все параметры оценки самостоятельно.									
Диагностика индивидуального развития детей 3-4 лет																			
2025-2026 учебный год																			
гр.№ 14																			
В соответствии с Федеральной образовательной программой дошкольного образования										Диагностика проводится 2 раза в год: в начале и в конце учебного года.									
Приказ Министерства просвещения РФ от 25.11.2022г.										Для проведения сравнительного анализа используется автоматический подсчёт средних значений по достижениям конкретного ребёнка и по отдельному параметру оценивания каждой образовательной области.									

Municipal Budgetary General Education Institution Pushkino Urban District, Moscow Region «Municipal Educational Complex No. 7»										Assessment of the pedagogical process is linked to the level at which each child demonstrates the required skills and abilities across educational domains:									
										Low level — 1 point: the child is unable to complete all assessment parameters and does not accept adult assistance;									
										Low-medium level — 2 points: the child completes some assessment parameters with adult assistance;									
										Medium level — 3 points: the child completes all assessment parameters with partial adult assistance;									
										Medium-high level — 4 points: the child completes all assessment parameters independently and with partial adult assistance;									
Diagnostics of Individual Development of Children Aged 3–4 Years										High level — 5 points: the child completes all assessment parameters independently.									
Group No. 14																			
2025–2026 Academic Year																			
In accordance with the Federal Educational Programme for Preschool Education										Diagnostics are conducted twice a year: at the beginning and at the end of the academic year.									
Order of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 25 November 2022										For comparative analysis, automatic calculation of average scores is used: for the achievements of each individual child; and for each assessment parameter within every educational domain.									

Figure 3

Pedagogical diagnostic template used in a Russian municipal preschool setting for children aged 3-4 years (translated) (Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino, 2025)

Figure 3 makes this visible. The diagnostic template used in a Russian municipal preschool setting for children aged 3-4 organises assessment through a numerical rating scale applied at two points during the academic year, with automatic calculation of average scores.

This is consistent with Uruntaeva and Gosheva's (2017) argument that observation in Russian preschool assessment practice is not simply an informal impression gathered in the course of everyday interaction. It is a systematically organised strategy involving clear aims, criteria, indicators, and dedicated recording tools. The practical implementation of such an approach, they note, presents its own challenges, particularly in selecting appropriate tools for recording and analysing children's development.

A further tension concerns the localised character of assessment tools. The system operates not through a single national procedure, but through locally developed diagnostic materials. This creates methodological complexity: the content, format, and rigour of diagnostic tools can differ substantially from one institution to another, with no shared basis for comparability. Yuzar and Glazunova (2025), in a systematic review of Russian literature on school readiness assessment, point to substantial conceptual and methodological fragmentation in this field, and to the absence of a unified approach. Although their focus is specifically on school readiness, their findings support the broader argument that child assessment in Russia is characterised less by the absence of diagnostics than by unevenness in how it is conceptualised and carried out across institutions.

A third tension concerns what pedagogical diagnostics actually makes visible. Policy rhetoric emphasises support for individual development and responsiveness to children's needs. The assessment forms examined capture not only cognitive, linguistic, and motor development, but also children's conformity to social norms, emotional regulation, safe behaviour, civic orientation, and school readiness. Within the local materials examined, what is framed in policy as developmental support becomes a structured record of children's alignment with expected behavioural, social, and civic norms.

What is largely absent from the available literature is critical engagement with these tensions. Most sources explain how pedagogical diagnostics, civic-patriotic education, or safe behaviour programmes should be organised, for example Uruntaeva and Gosheva (2017) and Malakhova et al. (2024). They engage much less with the everyday difficulties, limitations, or effects of formalised assessment in practice. Within the sources reviewed, the literature is in this sense dominated by normative and implementation-oriented accounts. This is a finding about the sources included in this review and not a claim about all Russian scholarship on the topic.

2.4.2 Positive dimensions of the system

Read alongside these tensions, the same materials also suggest several deliberate strengths in how Russian preschool education approaches assessment. The explicit prohibition on direct testing and formal attestation of preschool children, maintained consistently from FGOS DO through FOP DO and the 2023 recommendations, reflects a sustained policy commitment to protecting young children from high-stakes evaluation. Observation is repeatedly named, across the sources reviewed, as the preferred method of pedagogical diagnostics, which suggests a preference for gathering information about children in the context of their ordinary activity rather than through decontextualised testing situations.

The diagnostic form examined in this chapter also indicates a level of structure and professional intentionality: assessment is organised around clearly defined criteria and dedicated recording tools, conducted by trained practitioners as an ongoing part of pedagogical practice rather than as an occasional add-on. Uruntaeva and Gosheva (2017) frame this as a deliberate professional strategy, not an informal or ad hoc activity. The stated purpose of diagnostics, in the documents reviewed, is to inform individualised planning and support rather than to rank or compare children.

At a system level, national data suggest that access to preschool education in Russia is extensive: the Ministry of Education reported funded-place availability at 99.77% for children aged two months to seven years by late 2024 (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024). Extensive access of this kind is a precondition for any assessment system to reach the population it is intended to serve.

These positive dimensions should be read with the same caution applied elsewhere in this chapter: the diagnostic materials examined here were obtained from a single municipal preschool organisation and are not necessarily representative of practice nationwide. What can be said is that, within the documents and materials reviewed, the stated intentions behind pedagogical diagnostics point towards a system that values professional judgement, developmental support, and broad access, even where the practical tensions discussed above complicate this picture.

Overall, Russian preschool assessment is presented as anti-formal in official policy discourse, while the local assessment materials examined demonstrate that its enactment can nevertheless be highly structured. This combination of the policy-level rejection of direct testing and the structured local assessment practices examined highlights one of the defining tensions explored in this chapter.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has examined the development of preschool assessment in Russia from the pre-2013 framework to the contemporary framework established through FGOS DO, FOP DO, and the 2023 methodological recommendations. It has shown that, at the level of federal policy, assessment is framed as developmental, observational, and non-attestational, while the local assessment materials examined demonstrate that its enactment can nevertheless be highly structured.

The chapter has also explored the normative image of the child constructed across the federal policy documents and the local institutional materials reviewed. Together, these

documents suggest that developmental monitoring, school-readiness expectations, social regulation, and civic-value formation are closely connected within the current assessment framework, while recognising that the local materials examined represent the practices of a single municipal preschool organisation rather than the Russian ECE sector as a whole.

Finally, this chapter has considered both the tensions and the strengths of the contemporary Russian assessment system. It has highlighted the disjuncture between policy intentions and institutional enactment, while also recognising the system's emphasis on observation, developmental support, and broad access to early childhood education. These findings provide a foundation for the examination of assessment approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand in the following chapter and for the synthesis developed in Chapter Four.

Aotearoa New Zealand

The morning my daughter started kindergarten, I arrived with a list of questions.

I had written them down the night before, in the careful way I had learned to prepare for important appointments in a new country - What is the daily schedule? When do the children sleep? What programme do they follow to prepare for school? What do they learn, and how is progress recorded?

It was autumn. The air was sharp and the leaves on the trees along the street were turning, and I remember thinking that this, at least, felt familiar - the season of beginnings, the season when children in Russia also started new things.

The teacher who greeted us at the gate was warm and unhurried. She crouched down to say hello to my daughter, who pressed herself against my leg and said nothing. I waited for the moment when we would move inside, sit down, and go through my questions together, the way these things were done, the way I understood them to be done. That moment did not come.

Instead, the teacher gestured towards the yard, where a group of children were moving freely between a sandpit, a wooden construction frame, and a long table covered in paint and paper. Several of them were barefoot. One small boy had blue paint on his ear. A girl was dragging a plank of wood across the grass with complete seriousness of purpose, apparently going nowhere in particular. Nobody was directing them. Nobody was redirecting them. They were doing, it seemed, exactly what they wanted.

I stood at the edge of the yard and tried to understand what I was looking at. In Russia, children moved between activities on a schedule. There was a time for drawing, a time for music, a time for outdoor play - each with its purpose, each with its place. What I was seeing here had no visible structure, it had no visible plan and yet nobody seemed troubled by this - not the teacher, who was watching the children with a kind of relaxed attention, and not the children themselves, who were loud and absorbed and, unmistakably, happy.

My daughter took three tentative steps away from me, then four, then stopped beside the paint table. Within a minute, she had picked up a brush.

I turned to the teacher. What is the programme? I asked. How do you prepare them for school?

The teacher smiled. We follow the children's interests, she said. We document what they're learning. You'll see it in her portfolio.

I didn't know what a portfolio was but I nodded as though I did.

Walking home, I tried to work out what I felt - and couldn't separate it into anything clean. Relief that my daughter had gone so easily. Unease at the absence of everything familiar. Something that might have been envy, of the children, of their freedom. And underneath it all: is this enough?

What I did not know, standing on that autumn pavement with my list of unanswered questions, was that the documentation I had been told to expect - the portfolio, the Learning Stories, the photographs - was itself a form of answer. Not to the questions I had brought with me, but to questions I had not yet learned to ask.

Chapter 3: Assessment Practices in Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

This chapter examines early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a focus on the curriculum framework that shapes it and the assessment practices that have developed within it. It draws on the national curriculum document *Te Whāriki*, Ministry of Education publications and exemplar resources, national survey data, and a body of scholarly literature that has both celebrated and critically examined Aotearoa New Zealand's distinctive approach to documenting children's learning. This examination is situated within a broader international shift away from standardised, outcome-driven assessment towards more holistic and relational understandings of children's learning - a shift that reflects changing assumptions about childhood, development, and the purposes of early education (Rogoff, 2003; Woodhead, 2006).

One contextual detail is worth noting for readers coming to the Aotearoa New Zealand system from elsewhere. In Aotearoa New Zealand, children may begin school on their fifth birthday - earlier than in most other countries, and considerably earlier than in Russia, where compulsory schooling begins at seven. Children generally transition from ECE to school earlier in Aotearoa New Zealand than in Russia. The relationship between ECE and school, and the role of assessment in supporting continuity across this transition, is therefore an important consideration within Aotearoa New Zealand policy and practice.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 3.1 provides an overview of the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context - its history, service types, participation patterns, and current policy environment. Section 3.2 introduces *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood curriculum, and examines the philosophical commitments that shape how assessment is understood within it. Section 3.3 describes the assessment approaches that have developed from this foundation, including Learning Stories, portfolios, and the use of visual documentation. Section 3.4 considers the strengths of this approach, drawing on both research evidence and the scholarly literature. Section 3.5 examines the critiques and tensions that have emerged in the literature, including concerns about validity, the dominance of a single method, and the pressures of the broader political context.

3.1 The Aotearoa New Zealand ECE Context

Early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand is not compulsory, but it is widely attended. Children may begin primary school on their fifth birthday, and the years before school

entry are served by a diverse range of early learning services: education and care centres, kindergartens, playcentres, home-based services, Te Kōhanga Reo - whānau-based Māori language immersion settings that emerged in 1982 as a community-led response to the decline of te reo Māori - and Pasifika language nests serving Pacific communities (Ritchie & Skerrett, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2017). This diversity is not accidental. The *Before Five* reforms of 1989 brought previously fragmented childcare and education services under a single unified framework, establishing the Ministry of Education as the body responsible for policy, funding, and regulation across the whole sector (Lange, 1989). From the outset, the system was built on commitments to equity, cultural responsiveness, and quality - commitments that successive governments have interpreted and enacted in different ways.

Participation across this diverse system is high, particularly in the year before school. According to the 2025 Annual ECE Census, 193,033 children attended licensed services during the census week, with four-year-olds showing the highest participation rate at 89% of the estimated population (Ministry of Education, 2025). In 2024, 96.8% of children had attended some form of ECE in the six months before starting school (Ministry of Education, 2024). Unlike the Russian system, which is dominated by state and municipal institutions, Aotearoa New Zealand ECE is characterised by mixed provision: services range from privately owned education and care centres to community-run kindergartens and whānau-led language nests, all operating under a shared national framework. Since 2007, the government has funded up to 20 hours per week of ECE for all three- and four-year-olds, substantially reducing cost barriers for families (Ministry of Education, 2024).

That shared framework, however, is not immune to political change. Following the election of the National-ACT-NZ First coalition government in late 2023, the ECE sector became the first in Aotearoa New Zealand to be reviewed under a newly established Ministry for Regulation (**Ministry for Regulation, 2024**). Subsequent policy changes have included reductions in teacher qualification requirements, a freeze on pay parity, and the reversal of a previously announced extension of funded hours to two-year-olds (Ministry of Education, 2024). Sector organisations have raised concerns about the implications of these changes for the quality and equity of provision (Te Rito Maioha, 2025; Office of Early Childhood Education [OECE], 2025). As in Russia, where political priorities have fundamentally shaped what ECE is expected to do and for whom, Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood sector is not a neutral space: it reflects the values and priorities of the governments that fund and regulate it.

This political vulnerability is not new to the sector. Since the 1980s, Aotearoa New Zealand ECE has undergone repeated cycles of reform driven by shifting government priorities.

The 2002 strategic plan *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* promised improved participation, quality, and collaboration, but its initiatives were largely discontinued following the change to a National government in 2008 (Everiss et al., 2017). The subsequent focus on expanding participation resulted in a rapid growth of privately-owned centres, which Haggerty and Alcock (2016) argue transformed the sector into what they describe as "a site of intensifying compliance and control" (p. 137). Everiss et al. (2017) note that quality across the sector declined despite increased enrolment, and that inequities in access to quality provision grew, particularly for Māori and Pacific families (Marriott & Sim, 2015). These patterns of political priorities shaping what ECE is expected to do and for whom predate the current government's reforms and form the broader historical context within which today's changes must be understood.

At the centre of the Aotearoa New Zealand framework, and relatively stable across these political shifts, sits *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa*, the national early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017). Understanding assessment in the Aotearoa New Zealand context begins here.

3.2 The pedagogical context of Aotearoa New Zealand ECE: *Te Whāriki* and curriculum philosophy

Assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education cannot be understood in isolation from the curriculum framework that shapes it. Unlike accountability-driven models in which assessment operates as a separate layer of measurement applied to curriculum from the outside, assessment in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context is embedded within curriculum itself - an expression of its values rather than an external check on its outcomes. To understand why assessment takes the form it does in Aotearoa New Zealand settings, it is therefore necessary to begin with *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa*, the national early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017)

3.2.1 *Te Whāriki*: origins and bicultural foundations

Te Whāriki was first published in 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996) and substantially revised in 2017. Its development was led by Helen May and Margaret Carr from the University of Waikato, together with Tamati Muturangi Reedy and Tilly Reedy from Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, reflecting from the outset a commitment to partnership between Māori and non-Māori educational perspectives (Ministry of Education, 2017). At the time of its introduction, *Te Whāriki* was among the first national curriculum documents in the world to be developed for

early childhood education, and it has since attracted significant international attention for its distinctive philosophical approach (Carr & Lee, 2012). The 2017 revision retained the original principles and strands while updating the document to reflect changes in the social and educational landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand, including its growing cultural diversity and updated understandings of pedagogy and assessment.

Te Whāriki is explicitly a bicultural curriculum - one grounded in the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Aotearoa New Zealand's founding constitutional document. This means that *Te Whāriki* does not simply acknowledge Māori culture as one perspective among many; rather, it recognises Māori as tangata whenua and commits to protecting and sustaining te reo Māori and tikanga Māori across all early learning settings (Ministry of Education, 2017). This bicultural foundation has direct implications for assessment: it shapes who is seen as a legitimate participant in the assessment process, what kinds of knowledge and learning are valued, and how children's identities and cultural connections are recognised within documentation practices.

The curriculum takes its name from a Māori word meaning a woven mat. Just as a whāriki is woven from many strands into a coherent whole, the curriculum is understood as something that kaiako (early childhood teacher), children, families, and communities weave together at the local level, using a shared framework as their foundation (Ministry of Education, 2017). This metaphor is significant: it signals that *Te Whāriki* is not a fixed prescription to be delivered uniformly, but a basis upon which each setting creates its own distinctive educational programme. Diversity, flexibility, and responsiveness to local context are built into the architecture of the framework itself.

3.2.2 Principles, strands, and the organisation of the curriculum

The curriculum framework is organised around four principles and five strands. The four principles - empowerment (whakamana), holistic development (kotahitanga), family and community (whānau tangata), and relationships (ngā hononga) - describe fundamental expectations for all early childhood provision in Aotearoa New Zealand. Together, they articulate a view of the child as someone who learns through relationships with people, places, and things; whose development must be understood as a connected whole rather than as a set of discrete measurable domains; and whose family and community are integral, not peripheral, to their educational experience (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The five strands - wellbeing (mana atua), belonging (mana whenua), contribution (mana tangata), communication (mana reo), and exploration (mana aotūroa) - describe broad areas of valued learning and development. Each strand is accompanied by goals for kaiako and learning outcomes for children. Importantly, these outcomes are not articulated as measurable targets to

be achieved at specific ages; they are framed as broad statements of valued knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that children develop over time (Ministry of Education, 2017). This framing has significant implications for assessment, because it means that assessment within *Te Whāriki* is oriented not towards checking whether particular milestones have been reached, but towards noticing, recognising, and responding to learning as it unfolds in children's everyday experiences.

Te Whāriki draws on multiple theoretical traditions, including sociocultural theory, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, kaupapa Māori theory, and Pasifika approaches to learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). The influence of sociocultural theory is particularly evident in the emphasis on learning as relational and situated - occurring through interaction between children, adults, places, and cultural tools, rather than as something that takes place inside the individual child in isolation. As Carr and Lee (2012) observe, this theoretical orientation is foundational to how learning is understood and documented in Aotearoa New Zealand settings: learning is distributed across relationships and contexts, and assessment must therefore attend to those relationships and contexts, not only to individual performance.

3.2.3 The child as competent and confident learner

Central to *Te Whāriki* is a particular vision of childhood and the child. The curriculum positions children as "competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 6). This is not merely aspirational language: it has direct pedagogical and assessment implications. If children are understood as already competent - as active meaning-makers rather than as incomplete learners waiting to acquire knowledge - then the purpose of assessment shifts accordingly. The task is no longer primarily to identify gaps against a normative developmental standard, but to make visible the learning that children are already engaged in, and to recognise and build upon it.

This vision of the child is grounded in both the bicultural framework of *Te Whāriki* and its sociocultural theoretical commitments. Within the bicultural framing of *Te Whāriki*, children are positioned as inherently capable and connected to their ancestors and to their community across time (Ministry of Education, 2017). Sociocultural theory, drawing particularly on the work of Vygotsky (1978), similarly positions children as active participants in learning rather than passive recipients of instruction (Carr & Lee, 2012). Both traditions converge in *Te Whāriki* on a strengths-based orientation: assessment should illuminate what children know and can do, and what they are becoming, rather than measure them against what they have not yet achieved.

3.2.4 Assessment as embedded in curriculum

Assessment is addressed directly within *Te Whāriki* under the section on assessment, planning, and evaluation. The document states that assessment "makes valued learning visible" and identifies its purpose as formative - supporting curriculum planning and enhancing learning, rather than evaluating children against fixed standards (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63). This formative orientation distinguishes the Aotearoa New Zealand approach from models in which assessment primarily serves accountability or gatekeeping functions.

Assessment within *Te Whāriki* is described as occurring both informally, as kaiako observe and respond to children's engagement in everyday experiences, and through more formal documented practices, including written observations, photographs, and portfolios of children's learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). Narrative forms of assessment - in which learning is documented through stories rather than checklists or rating scales - are explicitly endorsed as consistent with the curriculum's principles. The curriculum names *Kei Tua o te Pae*, a Ministry of Education exemplar series developed to support narrative assessment practice, as an assessment framework consistent with values of *Te Whāriki*.

This alignment between curriculum and assessment is precisely what makes the Aotearoa New Zealand approach distinctive. As has been noted in the research literature, assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE is expected to align with *Te Whāriki* and is shaped by the curriculum's framework rather than by narrow testing logic (Cameron, 2022). The following sections examine these practices in more detail.

3.3 Assessment approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE

The philosophical commitments embedded in *Te Whāriki* gave rise to a distinctive set of assessment practices. Rather than being implemented through checklists or standardised tools, assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings is enacted through narrative documentation, portfolios, and the strategic use of visual materials, approaches designed to make children's learning visible in ways that honour the curriculum's relational and holistic values (Ministry of Education, 2017). This orientation shaped the development of assessment forms that emphasise children's strengths, dispositions, interests, relationships, and participation rather than predefined developmental outcomes or standardised benchmarks (Mitchell, 2008). The following sections examine these practices in detail, beginning with Learning Stories as the dominant form of documented assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE.

3.3.1 Learning Stories: what they are and why they fit *Te Whāriki*

The most widely used approach to assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education is the Learning Stories. Developed by Margaret Carr and closely aligned with the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*, Learning Stories are narrative accounts written by kaiako that document meaningful episodes of children's learning (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). Rather than recording what children cannot yet do, or measuring their performance against age-based norms, a Learning Story captures a moment of engagement, curiosity, persistence, or connection - and interprets it in terms of the child's learning dispositions and developing identity as a learner.

The structure of a Learning Story typically follows a formative assessment sequence: noticing, recognising, responding, recording, and revisiting (Ministry of Education, 2017; Carr & Lee, 2012). Kaiako first notice something significant in a child's engagement with people, places, or things. They then recognise this as learning - connecting what they observe to the values and outcomes embedded in *Te Whāriki*. They respond, either in the moment or through subsequent planning. They record the episode, usually in written form accompanied by photographs. And they revisit the story with the child, the child's family, and colleagues, opening up a dialogue about learning that extends beyond the single moment of documentation.

This approach fits *Te Whāriki* because it shares the same underlying values and beliefs about children and learning. Where *Te Whāriki* positions children as competent and confident learners whose development is holistic, relational, and culturally situated, Learning Stories document learning in exactly those terms. They foreground children's interests and dispositions, including curiosity, persistence, courage, and responsibility, rather than their acquisition of discrete skills (Carr, 2001). They treat learning as something that happens in the context of relationships and participation, not as an individual cognitive achievement to be measured in isolation. Carr and Lee (2012) argue that through repeated telling and revisiting of these stories, children develop what they call learner identities, growing understandings of themselves as people who can take on challenges, make connections, and contribute to their learning communities.

A Learning Story might, for example, begin with a teacher's observation of a four-year-old who spends an extended period arranging loose materials into patterns, returning to the activity across several days. The teacher notices the child's sustained focus and increasing complexity in the arrangements, recognises this as evidence of perseverance and emerging mathematical thinking, and responds by adding new materials to the environment and writing a narrative account that is shared with the child and their family. The story does not record

whether the child has met a developmental milestone; it documents who this child is as a learner in this moment.

The widespread adoption of Learning Stories in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE was supported by significant Ministry of Education investment. The publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009), a twenty-volume series of assessment exemplars developed to support kaiako in understanding and implementing narrative assessment, played an important role in establishing Learning Stories as the dominant assessment practice across the sector (Carr & Lee, 2012). The series has not been revised or republished since, and does not reflect the 2017 update of *Te Whāriki*. McLachlan and McLaughlin (2022), in their historical review of assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE, describe this period as a decisive shift in professional culture - one in which narrative assessment moved from being one option among many to becoming the dominant paradigm across the sector. A national survey conducted by Mitchell (2008) confirmed this shift, finding substantial growth in narrative and credit-based assessment practices, with Learning Stories featuring prominently across a wide range of ECE settings.

3.3.2 Portfolios and documentation

Learning Stories do not exist in isolation. In Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings, they are typically gathered into portfolios - collections of assessment documentation that build up over time to create a record of a child's learning journey. A portfolio might include written Learning Stories, annotated photographs, samples of children's creative work, transcripts of conversations, and contributions from families (Ministry of Education, 2017). Together, these materials tell a more complex story of learning than any single observation could capture.

Portfolios serve several purposes within the *Te Whāriki* framework. For kaiako, they provide a basis for curriculum planning, enabling teachers to track patterns in children's interests and dispositions, identify possible next steps, and reflect on their own pedagogical decisions. For children, portfolios are not simply passive records: they are objects to be revisited, shared, and discussed. Carr and Lee (2012) document how children engage with their own portfolios in ways that contribute to their developing sense of themselves as learners, recognising their own learning journey, talking about what they have done, and setting their own goals for what they might do next. The portfolio, in this sense, functions as what Carr and Lee call a boundary object - a term drawn from the sociology of knowledge to describe an artefact that holds meaning for different communities and can travel between them without losing its core significance. In early childhood education, the portfolio serves exactly this function: it carries a child's Learning Story

across the different contexts of their life, connecting the ECE setting, the home, and the wider community.

Family and whānau involvement is a central expectation within this documentation practice. Principle of family and community (whānau tangata) in *Te Whāriki* means that parents and whānau are not simply informed about their children's learning after the fact; they are invited to contribute to it. Families may add their own observations, responses, and photographs to a child's portfolio, and kaiako are expected to take seriously the knowledge that families bring about their children's capabilities, interests, and experiences at home (Ministry of Education, 2017). More recently, the development of e-portfolios, digital platforms such as Storypark, Educa, and Tapestry that allow documentation to be shared online, has created new possibilities for this kind of ongoing dialogue between settings and families, enabling documentation to be updated and shared in real time across the distances that often separate ECE settings from the homes and communities they serve (Nuttall et al., 2023). Nuttall et al. (2023) note that thousands of early childhood services across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand now use such platforms, so that for many families a child's Learning Story arrives first as a notification on a phone rather than as a page revisited together at home.

3.3.3 The role of images in assessment documentation

Photographs and other visual materials play a particularly important role in Learning Stories and portfolios. In Aotearoa New Zealand ECE documentation, images are not simply decorative or illustrative; they function as a core part of the assessment itself. Gunn et al. (2022) argue that images in ECE assessment documentation serve multiple purposes: they make learning visible to children and families in ways that written text alone cannot, they lend credibility to narrative observations by anchoring them in observable moments, and they create a basis for dialogue, between kaiako and children, between settings and families, and among colleagues in professional reflection.

For children, photographs of their own learning can be powerful prompts for recognition and meaning-making. Carr and Lee (2012) document moments in which children revisiting photographs in their portfolios make significant connections, recognising themselves as learners, narrating their own experiences, and extending their understanding of what they have done and what they might do next. Images also support the involvement of family members who may find written narratives less accessible, providing an entry point into conversations about children's learning that crosses language and literacy barriers.

The use of images in assessment documentation is therefore consistent with broader commitments of *Te Whāriki* to accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and the participation of

diverse communities. It reflects an understanding of documentation not as a record produced by professionals for professional purposes, but as a form of pedagogical communication, directed towards children, families, and communities as well as towards the internal planning processes of the ECE setting.

3.3.4 Other approaches within the sector

While Learning Stories are the dominant assessment approach across Aotearoa New Zealand ECE, they are not the only one in use. Alongside Learning Stories, the sector includes services organised around distinct pedagogical philosophies with their own approaches to documenting children's learning, including Montessori education, Reggio Emilia-inspired and project-based or inquiry-based practice, Playcentre, Kōhanga Reo and kaupapa Māori assessment, and, less commonly, Steiner/Waldorf, HighScope, and forest school approaches.

Montessori education arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand in the early twentieth century and remains part of the country's diverse ECE landscape (Freeman et al., 2016). Some services have also drawn on the Reggio Emilia approach developed in Italy, adapting its emphasis on inquiry, pedagogical documentation, and project-based investigation of children's own questions, closely related concepts often used together, to the Aotearoa New Zealand context (Mawson, 2010). Assessment within this kind of project-based, inquiry-driven practice tends to foreground documentation of a project's development over time, tracing children's questions and working theories as an investigation unfolds, rather than the single-episode narrative structure of a typical Learning Stories.

Two further approaches are historically significant within Aotearoa New Zealand specifically. Playcentre is a parent-led cooperative movement, unique in origin to Aotearoa New Zealand, in which parents rather than qualified teachers act as educators, a model that has faced ongoing policy pressure as the sector has moved towards teacher professionalisation (Manning, 2019). Kōhanga Reo, Māori-medium "language nests," operate under a bicultural curriculum framework shared with, but distinct from, mainstream *Te Whāriki*, and some kōhanga have developed their own kaupapa Māori assessment approaches as an explicit alternative to Learning Stories, grounded in Māori epistemology rather than in the sociocultural theory that underpins narrative assessment more broadly (Rameka, 2021).

Less common in the Aotearoa New Zealand sector, but part of the wider international landscape of early childhood approaches from which some Aotearoa New Zealand services draw inspiration, are Steiner/Waldorf education, which emphasises observation of the whole child within a rhythmic, imaginative environment rather than narrative documentation (Becker et al., 2023); HighScope, built around a structured "plan-do-review" sequence in which children's own

planning and reflection form part of the assessment process (Wiltshire, 2012); and forest school approaches, which situate assessment within extended outdoor, nature-based learning (Williams-Siegfriedsen, 2012).

These alternatives are generally practised within, rather than instead of, the *Te Whāriki* framework, and there is limited academic literature examining their assessment practices specifically within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Their existence is noted here to indicate that the dominance of Learning Stories discussed in this chapter, and returned to in section 3.5.3, describes the mainstream of the sector rather than its entirety.

3.4 Strengths of the Aotearoa New Zealand Approach

The assessment approach that has developed within the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context represents a significant departure from more conventional models of early childhood assessment. Rather than positioning assessment as an external check on children's developmental progress, the Aotearoa New Zealand approach treats it as an integral dimension of curriculum - a practice of pedagogical attention oriented towards making learning visible and supporting its continuation. This shift is not merely philosophical: it has concrete implications for how educators observe, what they choose to document, and how they use that documentation to shape the curriculum. It is also the starting point for understanding why the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to early childhood assessment has attracted sustained engagement, both nationally and internationally, as a significant contribution to the field (Cameron, 2022; Carr & Lee, 2012; Mitchell, 2008). The following discussion examines the key dimensions of this approach and considers what makes it pedagogically powerful.

3.4.1 Assessment as interpretation

The distinctive character of assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE can be traced, in part, to the professional and intellectual context in which it emerged. Prior to *Te Whāriki* and the development of Learning Stories, assessment in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, as elsewhere, relied heavily on developmental checklists, running records, and time-sampling procedures designed to map children's progress against normative milestones. These approaches positioned the educator as an objective observer measuring a child's attainment of predetermined skills. The introduction of *Te Whāriki* in 1996 challenged this model directly: a curriculum grounded in sociocultural theory and centred on the child as a competent, relational learner could not be coherently assessed through tools designed to measure isolated developmental outcomes (Carr & Lee, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017).

In response, Margaret Carr and colleagues developed what became known as the Learning Stories framework - a narrative approach to assessment in which educators write structured accounts of children's learning as it unfolds in context. Rather than recording whether a child has achieved a checklist item, a Learning Story captures a moment, a child persisting through difficulty, expressing a point of view, taking responsibility within a shared activity, and interprets it in relation to the learning dispositions that *Te Whāriki* identifies as valued outcomes (Carr, 2001). The framework asks educators to notice what children are doing, to recognise the learning that is present, and to respond in ways that support its continuation and development (Ministry of Education, 2017). As Carr and Lee (2012) argue, this process of noticing, recognising, and responding is not merely a documentation technique; it is an expression of a sociocultural understanding of learning as relational, situated, and always embedded in context.

The shift from checklist to narrative was also a shift in epistemology: it required educators to bring professional judgement and interpretive skill to the act of documentation, rather than simply matching observations to predetermined categories. Mitchell's (2008) national survey of ECE services captured the scale of this transformation across the sector. Between 2003 and 2007, the proportion of teachers using Learning Stories rose from 78 to 94 percent, while the use of checklists and time-sampling declined significantly. Mitchell characterised these shifts as a collective movement towards qualitative and interpretive methods of documentation that were able to capture the learner within contexts of relationships and environments, methods capable of assessing complex outcomes such as learning dispositions, which are not predetermined and cannot be reduced to a single observable behaviour (Mitchell, 2008). Critically, this movement was not incidental; it reflected the deliberate alignment of assessment practice with the theoretical commitments of the curriculum itself.

3.4.2 Relational practice and the inclusion of child and whānau voice

One of the most significant features of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach is that assessment is intended to be understood not as a professional act performed on a child, but as a collaborative process in which the child, the family, and the kaiako all have a part to play. This relational dimension is embedded within the principles of *Te Whāriki*. Learning Stories are intended to be shared with children and their families; portfolios are designed to travel between the setting and the home; and parents and whānau are actively encouraged to contribute their own observations and perspectives on their children's learning (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The inclusion of children as participants in their own assessment reflects the curriculum's positioning of children as competent and confident learners, as people with perspectives worth seeking, not merely subjects to be documented. Mitchell's (2008) survey found that 84 percent of

teachers reported children revisiting their assessment portfolios, while around a third of settings actively encouraged children to make their own judgements about their achievements or to contribute to decisions about what was recorded. These practices represent a meaningful departure from assessment models in which children are assessed without any awareness of, or participation in, the process.

The growth in family involvement has been equally significant. In 2003, 53 percent of parents surveyed reported involvement in teaching and learning processes in their child's ECE setting; by 2007, this figure had risen to 80 percent (Mitchell, 2008). The most common forms of involvement included taking portfolios home, contributing stories and observations from the home environment, and, for more than half of parents, participating in planning and evaluation. Carr and Lee (2012) argue that this capacity to draw families into the assessment process is one of the most educationally significant features of the Learning Stories framework: it makes the values and practices of the ECE setting legible to families, creates opportunities for genuine dialogue about children's learning, and positions parents as knowledgeable contributors rather than passive recipients of professional judgements.

More recent qualitative research adds nuance to this picture of partnership. Salcin-Watts (2019), interviewing nine teachers and ten parents across two Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings, found that teachers and parents converged on eight shared features they valued in a Learning Story, but the study also surfaced points where professional and parental priorities did not fully align, suggesting that partnership in practice is negotiated rather than automatically achieved by the framework's design. Sands and McChesney (2022) offer a complementary, longitudinal illustration of what this partnership can produce over time: inviting six children, their families, and their teachers to reread and reflect on Learning Stories written years earlier, they found that the stories had shaped how children came to see themselves, and how families came to see their children, as learners, an effect the researchers describe as still occurring within a sector where the value of Learning Stories is, as they put it, increasingly contested.

3.4.3 Bicultural responsiveness

A further strength of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach, and one that is genuinely distinctive by international standards, is its commitment to bicultural responsiveness - the embedding of Māori values, language, and perspectives within the assessment framework itself. This is not an optional feature or a supplementary consideration; it flows directly from the status of *Te Whāriki* as a bicultural curriculum grounded in the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Ministry of Education, 2017).

In practical terms, this means that assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings are expected to acknowledge and affirm children's cultural identities and connections, to incorporate te reo Māori where appropriate, and to recognise forms of knowledge and learning that are grounded in Māori ways of being and knowing. The Ministry of Education's assessment exemplar series, *Kei Tua o te Pae*, includes dedicated resources on bicultural assessment, offering guidance on how to embed tikanga Māori within documentation practices and how to centre cultural identity within the Learning Stories framework (Mitchell, 2008). Mitchell's (2008) survey found that engagement with these resources had helped 40 percent of teachers to develop bicultural frameworks in their assessment work - a significant shift reflecting the gradual embedding of this dimension in professional practice across the sector.

For children of Māori descent, this matters in ways that extend beyond symbolic recognition. Assessment that acknowledges whakapapa, connection to whānau and community, and knowledge of te reo Māori affirms cultural identity as central to the Learning Stories, not as background context. Carr and Lee (2012) argue that this orientation is foundational to the Learning Stories framework's capacity to construct positive learner identities: when assessment recognises who a child is and where they come from, their history, their relationships, their ways of knowing, it strengthens the connection between learning and identity that supports ongoing engagement and resilience. In this respect, the bicultural dimension of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach is not simply a matter of cultural inclusion; it is an expression of a deeper philosophical commitment to assessment as a practice that sees and honours the whole child.

3.5 Tensions, Critiques, and Political Pressures

The strengths of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to early childhood assessment are real and well-documented. Yet any honest engagement with the literature requires acknowledging that Learning Stories, and the broader assessment philosophy within which they operate, Learning Stories, and the broader assessment philosophy within which they operate, have also attracted some critique, notably from Blaiklock (2008) and others discussed in the sections below. These critiques are themselves contested: proponents argue that Learning Stories can capture children's interests and dispositions (Carr, 2001) and support the development of learner identities over time (Carr & Lee, 2012). Nor do these critiques simply dismiss what the approach offers; rather, they raise questions about what is left unaddressed, what risks emerge when a single method comes to dominate an entire sector, and what pressures, from within the profession and from outside it, complicate the conditions under which assessment can function well. Attending to these tensions is not a retreat from the strengths outlined in the previous

section; it is part of what it means to take assessment seriously as a professional and pedagogical practice.

3.5.1 Questions of validity and the limits of subjectivity

One of the most persistent concerns raised in relation to Learning Stories is the question of validity, that is, whether the assessments they produce can be trusted to represent what they claim to represent. Ken Blaiklock, a Aotearoa New Zealand researcher, was among the first to articulate this concern systematically. In a detailed critique published in 2008, Blaiklock argued that because Learning Stories are interpretive by design, because the educator's subjective reading of a situation is embedded in the documentation from the outset, there are significant difficulties in establishing whether any given story accurately captures what was happening in a child's learning, or whether it reflects the particular perspective, assumptions, or priorities of the person who wrote it (Blaiklock, 2008).

This concern has practical implications. Blaiklock (2008) noted that publications on Learning Stories provide less guidance on where, when, or how often to observe a child, or on how to select which moments are worth documenting. In practice, this means that it is common for a child's Learning Story to be based on a brief observation, sometimes as short as a few minutes, made while the educator is simultaneously engaged with other children. The resulting document may be written after the event, from memory rather than from contemporaneous notes. Blaiklock (2008) questioned whether assessments drawn from such limited and potentially unreliable evidence can support confident professional judgements about children's learning.

A related concern involves the collegial processes that are meant to strengthen the validity of Learning Stories. Carr (2001) proposed that validity could be achieved through discussion, by involving multiple staff members, families, and children in interpreting each story. In principle, this is sound; in practice, Blaiklock (2008) observed, the demands of the working day mean that the depth and frequency of such discussions are uneven. When a story has already been written with an interpretation embedded in it, other voices may be less likely to challenge that reading, particularly where there are hierarchies within the staff team. The result can be an assessment that appears collaborative but reflects, in practice, a single perspective.

More recently, Wanoa and Johnston (2019) have taken up Blaiklock's critique constructively, arguing that the validity and reliability of Learning Stories can be strengthened without abandoning their narrative and strengths-based character. Working through each stage of the notice-recognise-respond sequence, they propose concrete strategies: familiar observers and informally shared observations to support descriptive validity at the noticing stage, peer review and multiple perspectives, including those of children and parents, to support construct validity

at the recognising stage, and those same multiple perspectives to support accuracy in what is written into a response. Their argument suggests that the validity concerns Blaiklock (2008) raised are not necessarily inherent to narrative assessment, but are addressable through more deliberate collegial and dialogic practice, the very practice that, as noted above, working conditions often make difficult to sustain.

3.5.2 The dispositional focus and the risk of narrowing

A second set of concerns relates to what Learning Stories prioritise, and what they may leave out. The Learning Stories framework is built around the assessment of learning dispositions - broad orientations towards learning such as curiosity, perseverance, and responsibility. Blaiklock (2008, 2010) argued that this focus, while valuable in itself, can lead to the neglect of children's developing knowledge and skills in specific domains, including language and literacy, mathematics, science, and the arts. *Te Whāriki* includes learning outcomes related to all of these areas, but because Learning Stories are not structured to document progress in particular domains of knowledge, these outcomes can become invisible within the assessment record.

Blaiklock (2010) extended this concern to the curriculum itself, arguing that the holistic and non-prescriptive nature of *Te Whāriki*, one of its philosophical strengths, also creates conditions in which important areas of children's learning can be inadvertently overlooked. Because the curriculum offers goals, learning outcomes, and examples of practice rather than specifying what must be covered or assessed, individual settings have considerable latitude in what they document and prioritise. For some settings and some children, this flexibility works well. For others, it may mean that significant gaps in learning go unnoticed.

3.5.3 The problem of dominance: one method for all purposes

Zhang (2015) approached the critique from a different angle, focusing not on the internal limitations of Learning Stories but on what he called the problem of dominance - the fact that Learning Stories had become so thoroughly promoted as the correct form of assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE that alternatives were rarely considered, even where they might serve children better. By 2008, Mitchell's national survey had found that 94 percent of teachers were using Learning Stories as their primary assessment method (Mitchell, 2008), and Zhang (2015) argued that this level of uniformity was educationally problematic.

Zhang's (2015) argument was that assessment has multiple purposes, and no single method can serve all of them equally well. Learning Stories may be well suited to documenting a child's engagement with a particular interest or relationship, but they are less well suited to

identifying children who may need additional support, tracking progress in specific skill areas, or informing decisions about early intervention. For children with special educational needs, in particular, the narrative and dispositional focus of Learning Stories may not provide the specific or structured information that their learning requires (Zhang, 2015). The dominance of a single approach, Zhang argued, is not a sign of quality; it is a sign of a sector that has narrowed its conception of what assessment is for.

3.5.4 Implementation gaps and ERO concerns

Even within its own terms, the implementation of narrative assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE has not always matched its promise. The Education Review Office (ERO), the body responsible for externally monitoring the quality of educational provision across the sector, has repeatedly noted gaps between the intentions of the Learning Stories framework and its actual enactment in settings. Cameron (2022) summarises successive ERO findings over more than a decade, noting that in many settings assessment documentation focused on recording children's participation in activities rather than analysing their learning or planning for its extension. The "Respond" element of the notice-recognise-respond framework, the formative element that connects assessment to future planning, was frequently absent or reduced to brief and generalised statements (Cameron, 2022).

Mitchell's (2008) survey pointed to a related structural barrier: time. The most commonly reported obstacle to assessment practice across the sector was insufficient non-contact time during the working day, cited by 59 percent of teachers. Writing a meaningful Learning Story, discussing it with colleagues, sharing it with families, and using it to inform planning all require time that many educators struggled to find within their existing conditions of work. This is not a critique of the framework itself, but it is an important reminder that pedagogical ideals and workplace realities are not always aligned.

Fabian and Edwards' (2023) study of five experienced teachers across different Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings adds texture to this picture. Interviewing teachers about how they actually used the information collected through Learning Stories day to day, Fabian and Edwards found that this utilisation was considerably more complex and effortful than the framework's guidance suggests, requiring high levels of data literacy and sustained interpretive work that not all settings are resourced to support. Reese et al. (2019) offer a further piece of evidence about how enactment varies even within a single method. Observing teachers revisiting children's portfolios with them, they found that some teachers read the written Learning Stories aloud much as they would a picture book, while others used the portfolio as a prompt for open-ended conversation about the remembered event. These two orientations produced measurably different

outcomes for children's language, with the conversational approach eliciting longer, more complex talk from children than the read-aloud approach. Taken together, these studies suggest that the gap between the intentions of Learning Stories and their enactment is not only a matter of time or training, but also of how individual teachers choose, moment to moment, to use the same document.

3.5.5 Political pressures and the accountability context

The Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector does not operate in a political vacuum, and the assessment practices that have developed within it have become increasingly subject to pressures that shape what is expected of them (Haggerty & Alcock, 2016). In recent decades, there has been growing pressure internationally, and in Aotearoa New Zealand, to frame early childhood education in terms of measurable outcomes, economic return, and preparation for school (Haggerty & Alcock, 2016). These pressures sit in tension with a curriculum and assessment philosophy that explicitly rejects the measurement of children against fixed standards and resists the reduction of learning to quantifiable outcomes. Comparative research has consistently shown that such tensions between accountability demands and child-centred approaches are not unique to Aotearoa New Zealand (OECD, 2006).

Cameron (2022) notes that the 2017 revision of *Te Whāriki*, while retaining its original principles, introduced more explicit guidance on the use of assessment information to track children's progress and plan for future learning - a shift that reflects, in part, ongoing concerns about the consistency and rigour of assessment practice across the sector. The Aotearoa New Zealand government's early learning action plan, published in 2019, identified the need to develop a broader range of valid and culturally appropriate assessment tools as a strategic priority (Ministry of Education, 2019, cited in Cameron, 2022). This acknowledgement that Learning Stories alone may not be sufficient for all purposes represents a significant, if cautious, shift in official positioning. That strategic priority has since taken concrete form in Kōwhiri Whakapae (2024), a Ministry of Education resource developed to sit alongside Learning Stories rather than replace them, offering more structured guidance for noticing and responding to children's progress in oral language, literacy, mathematics, and social and emotional learning. Its introduction, returned to in Chapter 4, suggests that the tensions traced in this section are being addressed, however cautiously, at a systemic level.

Taken together, these tensions do not diminish the genuine pedagogical contribution of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to assessment. They do, however, suggest that its continuing development depends on the sector's willingness to engage honestly with what

narrative assessment can and cannot do, and to build assessment cultures that are flexible, rigorous, and responsive enough to serve all children well.

3.6 Summary

This chapter has examined early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, tracing the philosophical foundations of *Te Whāriki* and the assessment practices that have grown from them. What emerges from this examination is a picture of a system that is coherent in its intentions: a curriculum that positions children as competent and agentic learners, and an approach to assessment that is designed to honour that positioning, through narrative documentation, relational practice, and the active participation of children, families, and whānau.

The literature reviewed in this chapter has allowed me to name what I was seeing that morning. The strengths of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach, its emphasis on assessment as interpretation, its relational and participatory character, its commitment to bicultural responsiveness, are not accidental features. They are expressions of a coherent philosophical and pedagogical tradition, developed deliberately over decades in response to a particular vision of the child and of education. At the same time, the critiques examined in section 3.5, concerning validity, the risks of dispositional narrowing, the problem of one method serving all purposes, and the pressures of an accountability context are not peripheral concerns. They are part of an honest account of a system that, like all systems, contains tensions between its aspirations and its realities.

Taken together, Chapters 2 and 3 have mapped two distinct approaches to assessment in early childhood education, one shaped by federal standardisation, developmental monitoring, and a strong orientation towards school readiness; the other by curriculum-embedded narrative practice, relational pedagogy, and a commitment to making learning visible in context. Each system has its internal logic. Each has its strengths and its blind spots. And each, as this dissertation argues, can only be fully understood in relation to the other.

Chapter 4 takes up this synthesis work directly. Drawing on the autoethnographic thread that runs through the dissertation alongside the scholarly literature reviewed in these two chapters, it explores what happens when these two systems are held in the same frame - what contrasts become visible, what questions they raise for each other, and what a transnational perspective might offer to those thinking seriously about what assessment in early childhood education is for.

Months into my daughter's first year at kindergarten, I opened the Storypark app on my phone the way I had learned to, most evenings, once she was asleep. One entry that week described the dolls house, tucked into a quiet corner of the yard. My daughter had got there first that day, and she was assigning roles to her characters: a mum, a dad, a sister, and, though she had no brother, a brother too.

Then she had said one word, out loud, to no one in particular. Russia.

In that same moment, Kaiako had gently suggested it to her: that she used to live in Russia, and now she lived in Auckland. Nothing more was made of it. But kaiako had written something underneath, almost to herself: I think that this play allows her to understand the world that she lives in. There has been such a huge change in her young life and maybe this play is helping her to make sense of it?

I read that question twice, on a small glowing screen, in a quiet kitchen on the other side of the world from where my daughter's characters had just come from. This form of assessment was not a measurement of anything. Nobody was checking whether my daughter could name family members correctly, or use the past tense, or demonstrate an understanding of place. Someone had watched a child move a small wooden figure across a floor, and thought carefully, what she might be working out.

In the folder I had once been handed as methodologist, there had been no space for a wondering like that. I had spent years learning to notice children in one way. Reading that page on my phone, I began, slowly, to notice them in another.

Chapter 4: Synthesis

4.1 Introduction

The image with which this chapter opens, my child moving wooden figures across a floor and, in passing, naming the country she no longer lives in, captures in miniature the central questions this chapter seeks to make sense of. Nobody was measuring my daughter that afternoon. Someone was watching her closely, with a professional's attention, and wondering what she was working out. That distinction, between measuring a child and watching one, runs through everything that follows. Watching, in this sense, is not neutral either: it involves professional judgement about what is worth noticing and how to interpret it.

Chapters Two and Three traced two systems that have developed, largely independently of one another, distinct answers to the question of how a young child's learning should be assessed and documented. The Russian system emerged from cultural-historical theory and federal standardisation, producing assessment practices oriented towards developmental norms and school readiness. The Aotearoa New Zealand system emerged from a bicultural, sociocultural curriculum that positions children as already competent, producing assessment practices oriented towards narrative documentation and relational pedagogy. Both systems were shown to contain internal tensions, and neither was presented as a settled or finished achievement.

This chapter brings those two accounts into dialogue. It asks what each system's image of the child makes visible, and what it renders invisible, drawing on Moss's (2019) argument that assessment is never a neutral technical exercise but always an expression of a prior, often unstated, position on what childhood is and what education is for. It considers why variability in assessment tools appears in both contexts, despite arising from very different conditions in each. It examines how political and cultural pressures, differently constituted in Russia and in Aotearoa New Zealand, continue to shape what gets counted as evidence of a child's learning. Chapters Two and Three have already addressed the dissertation's first two supporting questions, concerning the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions that underpin assessment in each context; this chapter turns to the third, asking what tensions, contrasts, and resonances emerge when the two contexts are considered together. Throughout, the chapter draws on the scholarly literature reviewed in the previous chapters, while the autoethnographic material offers a complementary situated, interpretive, and reflexive lens through which the findings are examined.

The chapter closes by returning to the question of purpose. If assessment is never neutral, then asking what it is for, and for whom, is not a peripheral question but the one this entire synthesis has been building towards.

4.2 Images of the Child: Two Theoretical Trajectories

Dahlberg et al. (2013) argue that every assessment framework speaks in a particular language of evaluation, and that language is never chosen from nowhere. It rests on a prior answer, usually unstated, to the question of what a child is. Moss (2019) makes a related point directly: assessment is never a neutral technical exercise. It is always an expression of an image of the child. I did not have this vocabulary when I worked as a methodologist, but I recognise, now, that the folder I was handed on my first day contained an image of the child before it contained a single criterion.

The Russian materials examined in Chapter 2 point towards what was there termed a normative image of the child: a child who is becoming, over time and under guidance, socially organised, emotionally regulated, communicative, respectful of norms, and oriented towards the local and national community into which they are born. Chernyaeva's (2022) concept of controlled socialisation captures something of its logic. I built diagnostic tools within that logic for years without naming it as a logic at all; it simply felt like the shape competent professional practice took.

The Aotearoa New Zealand materials examined in Chapter 3 point towards a markedly different starting position. *Te Whāriki* positions children as "competent and confident learners and communicators... secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 6). Carr and Lee (2012) draw out the consequence for assessment directly: if children are already competent, the task of assessment shifts from identifying what is missing to making visible what is already present. Standing in a Aotearoa New Zealand kindergarten yard for the first time, I did not have this theory available to me either. What I had was the disorienting sense that nobody around me seemed to be looking for what was missing in my daughter at all.

Together, these contexts make visible how images of childhood are shaped by notions of becoming and being. It is worth noting that both images draw, in different ways, on the same theoretical ancestor. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory underpins both the Russian emphasis on development as a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978), and, through Carr and Lee's (2012) sociocultural reading of *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa New Zealand emphasis on learning as

relational and situated. The same theoretical root, filtered through different political and cultural histories, and through my own two very different professional and parental encounters with it, has grown in two distinct directions.

4.3 Visibility and Invisibility: What Assessment Makes Seen

Every act of documenting a child's learning makes something visible. It also, unavoidably, makes something else disappear. The literature reviewed in the previous two chapters demonstrates this in different ways, and my own experience of reading assessment records in both systems, first as a methodologist and later as a parent on the other side of the world, sharpens the point in ways the literature alone cannot.

The diagnostic form used at Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino (2025), applies a five-point scale across five developmental domains, twice a year, with average scores calculated for each child and each parameter. What this instrument makes visible is considerable: a child's position relative to a defined set of criteria, tracked consistently over time, comparable across children within the same institution, and aggregable upward into the kind of system-level data that federal oversight requires. What it cannot make visible is the particular child behind the number. A score of four in the social-communicative domain records that a child met a criterion. It does not record how the child met it, what they were thinking as they did so, or what the moment meant to them. The system becomes visible. The child, in their individuality, recedes behind it.

The five-part structure that Carr and Lee (2012) describe, noticing, recognising, responding, recording, and revisiting, is built to preserve exactly what a rating scale discards: the specific child, in a specific moment, thinking in a specific way. Arndt and Tesar (2015) frame this capacity in similar terms, arguing that narrative assessment creates space for the invisible - attributes such as curiosity, trust, and a sense of belonging that are difficult to measure but observable in children's everyday responses, precisely the qualities a rating scale is not designed to register. This is precisely what critics of the approach have identified as its weakness. Blaiklock (2008) observed that Learning Stories offer little guidance on what should be observed, when, or how often, leaving assessment dependent on the judgement of an individual kaiako in a way that resists comparison across children, teachers, or settings. A Learning Story cannot easily be quantified. It cannot straightforwardly answer the question a national ministry might ask: how is this cohort progressing against expectation? What it can do is bring a particular child's learning into view: what this child was working out, on this day, in this moment. Learning Stories do not stop at the moment, however. Gathered in a portfolio, they

build a picture of continuity over time, and they involve the child's family, the centre, and the wider community to which the child belongs (Carr & Lee, 2012).

My reflection that opened this chapter makes the contrast concrete, while showing only one story. The kaiako who wrote about my daughter's play did not record whether she could correctly identify family members, or use past tense verbs, or demonstrate age-appropriate understanding of place, questions a diagnostic instrument might reasonably ask. She wrote, instead, a question of her own, one that shows careful attention to the complexity of my daughter's new reality: *I think that this play allows this child to understand the world that she lives in... maybe this play is helping her to make sense of it?*

Read against the diagnostic form described in Chapter 2, this is a different kind of document entirely. It offers no comparable data point, no criterion met or unmet, nothing that could be entered into a spreadsheet alongside another child's score. What it offers is a witnessed child, caught in the act of working something out, with an adult wondering alongside her rather than measuring against her.

Neither form of visibility is complete, and neither should be read as simply superior to the other. Zhang (2015) frames this as the problem of dominance: assessment serves multiple purposes, accountability, planning, communication with families, pedagogical reflection, and no single method serves all of them equally well. A system built to make the child statistically legible to an oversight body will, by design, lose sight of the particular child. A system built to make the particular child vividly present to a parent or teacher is, by the same design, less well suited to producing comparable information about children as a group, even though it can offer careful professional insight into each child's learning. The Russian and Aotearoa New Zealand systems have simply made different choices about which kind of invisibility they are willing to accept.

4.4 Variability for Different Reasons

Both systems share the same surface feature: assessment tools vary considerably, not only between Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand, but from one region, institution, or individual centre to another within each country. Yet this shared variability, on inspection, has almost nothing in common beneath it.

In the Russian case, variability arises from an absence. FOP DO establishes common content and planned outcomes at the federal level (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022), yet each institution translates those outcomes into its own diagnostic tools.

The five-point rating scale used at Municipal Educational Complex No. 7, Pushkino (2025), reflects one institution's solution to that translation problem; other institutions, working from the same federal requirements, may have built something different. I lived this variability from the inside. Part of my role as methodologist was to design exactly this kind of local instrument, and I remember assuming, at the time, that the version we built was simply how assessment was done, without fully grasping that a preschool two districts over might have developed something quite different from the same federal starting point.

In the Aotearoa New Zealand case, variability arises from a decision. *Te Whāriki* was deliberately built as a curriculum framework rather than a delivery script, woven locally by kaiako, children, families, and communities from a shared set of principles and strands (Ministry of Education, 2017). A kindergarten favouring Learning Stories and a home-based service favouring more informal daily communication with families are both, in principle, equally faithful to the curriculum. Reading my daughter's portfolio and talking with other parents, I noticed this variety directly, and it took me time to understand that the differences I was seeing were not necessarily inconsistency or a lack of a proper system, in the sense I had once used that phrase, but a philosophy working as it was designed to.

Zhang's (2015) critique of what he calls the problem of dominance suggests that Aotearoa New Zealand's non-prescriptive philosophy has not, in practice, prevented a single method, the Learning Stories, from becoming close to universal across the sector (Fabian & Edwards, 2023; Wanoa & Johnston, 2019). The recent introduction of Kōwhiri Whakapae (2024), designed to strengthen formative assessment and teaching within the framework of *Te Whāriki*, provides additional guidance and examples that may complement existing assessment practices. This points to an ongoing tension between the flexibility intended by the curriculum and the strong influence of a dominant assessment approach. Consequently, a curriculum designed to permit variability has, in practice, produced something closer to convergence, whilst Russia's absence of a national standard has produced institution-level divergence that its own federal framework did not intend. Neither system has ended up where its own founding logic might have predicted. This mismatch points to a further factor that curriculum philosophy and federal standardisation alone cannot fully explain: the influence of policy on what assessment becomes in practice.

4.5 Political and Cultural Context as a Shaping Force

Both systems examined in this dissertation began from a formally stated intention to protect the early years from external pressure, and both have found that intention difficult to sustain in practice.

FGOS DO, introduced in Russia in 2013, framed its rejection of formal testing as a philosophical commitment: protecting childhood as a distinct stage of life, rather than treating it as preparation for school. The documents examined in Chapter 2 indicate that this protective framing did not hold in an unchanged form. As national policy priorities shifted from 2022 onward, the government adopted Federal Law No. 371-FZ, and the subsequent FOP DO retained the anti-testing language of FGOS DO whilst linking preschool education more explicitly to civic and patriotic formation. I left the Russian system before this particular shift, but I recognise its shape: policy language that protects children from formal testing has never, in my experience of it, guaranteed protection from the state's broader interest in what kind of citizen a child is becoming.

Te Whāriki was built on a comparable protective premise: a flexible, child-led curriculum rather than a prescriptive, outcomes-focused one (Cameron, 2022), resisting the reduction of learning to quantifiable outcomes. This premise has also come under pressure (Haggerty & Alcock, 2016). More recently, following the election of the National-ACT-NZ First coalition government in late 2023, the ECE sector became the first in Aotearoa New Zealand to be reviewed under a newly established Ministry for Regulation (Ministry for Regulation, 2024). As a parent watching this unfold from outside the profession, I found it striking that a curriculum I had come to associate with a settled, almost protected pedagogical space was, in fact, being actively contested in exactly the way Russian preschool policy had been contested, only under a different political logic and on a different timeline.

Read together, these two histories suggest that any curriculum-makers' desire to shield early childhood assessment from politics is not, by itself, sufficient to achieve it. Russia's protection was philosophical, resting on a distinction between preschool and school; as Chapter 2 shows, from 2022 onward national policy priorities shifted to recast the same preschool years as a site of civic formation. Aotearoa New Zealand's protection was pedagogical, resting on a curriculum philosophy that resisted measurement; this philosophy has since come under pressure from an accountability culture that asks for measurable evidence of public investment (Haggerty & Alcock, 2016). Consequently, the tools of assessment reviewed in this dissertation cannot be understood only as technical instruments or as expressions of curriculum philosophy. They are shaped, too, by the political moment in which they are used, as I have now watched happen, in different forms, in both places I have called home.

4.6 What Is Assessment For? What Is ECE For?

The synthesis developed in this chapter points to a central conclusion: assessment is not simply a method for documenting learning. It reflects underlying beliefs about childhood and

about the purposes of early childhood education. The two contexts examined in this dissertation make different aspects of those beliefs visible. A children's rights perspective provides one way of considering whose interests these assessment practices serve and how fully they support children's development.

Woodhead (2006) and Moss (2019) both argue that how a society constructs childhood is never a neutral, descriptive matter, it implies a particular stance towards the child: someone whose development is already underway, already valuable, and not merely a future state to be engineered. Read against this standard, the normative image of the child traced in Chapter 2, oriented towards socially approved outcomes and civic formation, and the competent and confident learner at the centre of *Te Whāriki*, oriented towards recognising what a child already is, reflect two quite different answers to that question. This is not to suggest that Russian preschool education is indifferent to children's rights, nor that Aotearoa New Zealand's approach realises them without qualification. Both systems can, and do, appeal to children's wellbeing as a central justification for their practices. What differs is the emphasis. The Russian materials reviewed place particular weight on a child's successful integration into a collective and its values. *Te Whāriki* foregrounds a child's recognition as an already-capable individual within relationships of family and community, though its strands of belonging and contribution also value a child's place within a group (Ministry of Education, 2017).

This distinction bears directly on my own experience of moving between the two systems. As a methodologist, learning to construct and apply diagnostic criteria, the questions that mattered were: has this been met, and how does this child compare against what is expected at this age. As a parent reading Learning Stories, the questions that mattered were different: what did she do, and what might it mean to her. Neither set of questions is illegitimate. A system responsible for millions of children across a vast territory has reasons to want criteria that can be applied consistently and aggregated: comparable information allows those responsible for the system to plan, to allocate resources, and to see where support is needed (Zhang, 2015). A pedagogy built on daily relationships between children and the adults who know them has equally good reasons to prioritise the particular over the aggregate, because there assessment serves above all to inform teaching and to share a child's learning with the child and their family (Cameron, 2022). What insights drawn from this research suggest, however, is that the choice between these orientations is never merely technical. It is a choice about what a child is understood to be, and about what a society believes education in the earliest years is meant to achieve, socialisation into a shared national project, or recognition of an already unfolding individual life, or, more plausibly, some contested and shifting combination of both.

Reformulated this way, the question that opened this dissertation, how is children's learning assessed and documented in Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand cannot be separated from deeper assumptions about what early childhood education is for and whose interests assessment ultimately serves: those of the child, the family, the state, or some combination of these.

4.7 Implications

What this chapter has shown carries implications beyond an academic interest in contrast for its own sake. Read together, the two systems examined in this dissertation make visible three things about assessment that were not fully visible at the outset. First, every assessment practice creates a form of selective visibility: it brings certain aspects of a child's learning into view while leaving others less visible, and no amount of refinement removes this trade-off: a different tool simply makes different aspects of learning visible and leaves others less visible. Second, no assessment tool, however well designed, can serve every purpose at once; a structured diagnostic instrument offers comparability across children at the cost of the particular child in front of you, while a narrative instrument keeps the particular child in view without aiming to compare children with one another, and is therefore less suited to the aggregated information a system may need for planning (Zhang, 2015). Third, and most fundamentally, assessment practices do not simply describe a child's learning; they enact a particular image of childhood and a particular belief about what early childhood education is for. Whilst this dissertation has traced these three insights through Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand specifically, they are not, in the end, claims about either country. They are claims about what assessment is and does, wherever it is practised.

These insights matter for different audiences in different ways. For policymakers, they suggest that decisions about assessment frameworks are never merely technical or administrative; they are decisions about which children, and which aspects of children's lives, a system is prepared to make visible, and at what cost to others. Policymakers weighing consistency and equity against professional judgement and relational depth are choosing between different forms of selective visibility, not between a flawed system and a perfect one. In the Russian context, this dissertation has shown that the absence of a national assessment standard leaves equity questions largely unaddressed: a child's experience of being assessed may depend on which municipal institution she happens to attend. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the non-prescriptive nature of *Te Whāriki*, designed as a strength, can leave a curriculum vulnerable when political pressure moves faster than professional consensus about how to defend it. Protecting early childhood assessment from political interference, in either system, appears to

require more than a founding philosophical commitment. It also depends on the power that governments hold over institutions, and on whether professional bodies are able to hold that commitment in place when the political weather changes. In Aotearoa New Zealand, sector organisations have publicly contested recent policy changes (Te Rito Maioha, 2025; OECE, 2025).

For ECE leaders and centres reviewing their own assessment systems, the implication is to ask, before adopting or defending a given tool, what it makes visible, what it leaves unaddressed, and whether this matches the purpose the centre actually needs it to serve. The Ministry of Education's own recent introduction of Kōwhiri Whakapae (2024) as an additional support alongside Learning Stories suggests that this question is already being asked at a systemic level in Aotearoa New Zealand; the same question deserves equally deliberate answers at the level of the individual centre. A tool inherited from policy or convention may not be the tool best suited to a centre's own understanding of what its assessment is for. For teachers, choosing an assessment approach according to purpose, rather than according to habit or convenience, is not a technical decision but a professional one: it involves being honest about which children, or which aspects of a child's learning, a given tool will make easier to see, and which it will not. This matters not only for how learning is documented, but for how it is supported. A structured diagnostic tool can help a teacher notice a gap and plan a targeted response; a Learning Story can help a teacher notice a child's emerging interest and plan responses that build on it, both in the moment and over time (Cameron, 2022). Each approach, in other words, does not just record learning differently, it shapes what kind of support a teacher is prompted to offer next. For families, what matters is understanding that the way their child's learning is documented is never a neutral window onto that child. It carries assumptions, about competence, about development, about what counts as progress, that families are entitled to know about and to question.

For research, this dissertation demonstrates the value of bringing differently situated assessment systems into dialogue, as each can make visible assumptions, values, and limitations in the other that might otherwise remain taken for granted. What this integrative review cannot do, and what future research might, is to examine these questions empirically, and to examine how kaiako and Russian educators themselves understand the purposes of the tools they use, and how families in either context experience being assessed, or having their children assessed, in these two very different ways.

4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined the Russian and Aotearoa New Zealand systems in the same frame rather than treating them as separate stories, and three things became visible only once they were read together. The first is that both systems' images of the child, the normatively becoming child of the Russian materials and the already-competent child of *Te Whāriki*, draw on a shared theoretical ancestor in Vygotsky, yet have grown in markedly different directions under different political and cultural histories (Vygotsky, 1978; Carr & Lee, 2012). The second is that each system's chosen form of assessment and its associated documentation makes a particular kind of visibility possible at the cost of another: the diagnostic scale makes the system legible at the expense of the particular child, whilst the Learning Stories make each child's learning visible over time, without aiming to compare children with one another. The third is that variability in assessment tools, present in both contexts, arises for structurally different reasons, the absence of a single mandated national assessment tool in one case and a deliberate philosophical non-prescription in the other, and that both systems have been shaped by political pressure, though in different forms and under different political conditions: in Aotearoa New Zealand, sector organisations have publicly contested recent policy changes (Te Rito Maioha, 2025; Office of Early Childhood Education [OECE], 2025), whereas the Russian materials reviewed show national priorities being built directly into preschool policy and planning. Taken together, these findings return the examination to the question of purpose raised at the outset of this chapter. Assessment is never simply a technical choice between instruments, and is never neutral. It is, in each case, an answer to a prior and largely implicit question about what a child is and what early childhood education is for.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to ask how children's learning is assessed and documented in early childhood education in Russia and Aotearoa New Zealand, as represented in policy and academic literature, and what an examination of the two systems together might reveal that neither, examined alone, would show. The preceding chapters have offered an answer built cumulatively: a review of the Russian context, a review of the Aotearoa New Zealand context, and a synthesis, developed in Chapter 4, that read the two against one another and surfaced a shared theoretical root, a common pattern of internal variability, and a shared trade-off between different kinds of visibility.

These findings respond to an absence identified at the outset of this dissertation: that Russian and Aotearoa New Zealand scholarship on ECE assessment has developed largely in isolation from one another, leaving the assumptions embedded in each system largely unexamined against an external point of comparison (OECD, 2006). A children's rights

framework, such as the UNCRC (1989), offers one practical tool through which ECE leaders and policymakers in both contexts might evaluate whether their assessment practices serve the child's right to full development, rather than only institutional or national priorities.

This study has limitations that should temper how its findings are read. As an integrative literature review supported by autoethnographic reflection, it draws its evidence from published policy, scholarship, and my own situated experience of both systems, rather than from empirical data collected directly from children, families, or practitioners. The Russian material, in particular, rests substantially on documents obtained from a single municipal preschool organisation and cannot be taken as representative of national practice. The autoethnographic material offers an interpretive lens rather than generalisable evidence, and, as with all such reflection, personal experience can obscure as readily as it can illuminate (Ellis et al., 2011). Future research could usefully extend this work through interviews with Russian and Aotearoa New Zealand educators about how they themselves understand the purposes of the tools they use, through direct observation of assessment practice in both settings, or through comparative case studies that bring the two traditions into contact empirically rather than through literature and reflection alone.

I began this study still learning to read a form of documentation I had not grown up with, holding a folder of Learning Stories I did not yet know how to interpret. I finish it able to say, with more precision than I had then, what that folder was asking me to see, and what the folder I once handed out myself, in another country, had been asking others to see in turn. Assessment, in both places, has turned out to be less a method for recording what a child has learned than a decision, made and remade by every system that practises it, about the image of childhood a society holds.

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