

# Formative assessment practices in early childhood settings: evidence and implementation in NSW

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Formative assessment (FA) is an educational practice that has broad applicability and support. Most existing research has focused on children in school settings, despite the potential usefulness of formative assessment in early childhood education (ECE) for creating strong educational foundations.

## Background

This paper aims to support ECE practitioners and policy-makers by bringing together the available research on FA of children, contextualised to early childhood education in NSW. The first section describes what FA is and how it can be used in ECE settings. The second section looks at current and emerging evidence supporting FA practices in these settings. This section summarises the findings of a literature review by Macquarie University commissioned by the NSW Department of Education in 2019 into FA tools. The third section describes how four ECE services have embedded assessment for learning in their practices, based on interviews with service providers, centre directors, nominated supervisors, educational leaders and preschool room leaders. Finally, we consider the implications of the research for fostering greater application of evidence-based approaches in the NSW ECE sector.

## Main findings

The Macquarie University researchers identified 22 FA tools supported by varying degrees of psychometric evidence. However, only three tools also had evidence of effectiveness against educator practice outcomes. None of the tools reviewed had been evaluated against teacher practice or student outcomes using rigorous methods.

The case studies of FA practices in NSW ECE services identified varied models of implementation. The services chose FA approaches, such as observations and checklists. Their choices of FA approaches were motivated by their philosophy, curriculum and families' preferences.

Services relied on their educational leaders to train others in their assessment and planning approach.

Services integrated formative assessment into their day-to-day practice to suit their particular operational conditions.

Services used information from assessments to formulate their programs, communicate with parents and carers, and to inform transition to school. Commercial apps were used extensively for these purposes.

The lack of quality evidence for the effectiveness of assessment tools indicates that there is not yet a tool that is ready to be applied more widely at this stage in NSW. More research into the effectiveness of different FA approaches is needed. The implementation of formative assessment in case study services was also highly context-specific.

Evidence-based approaches need to (a) be adaptable and flexible to the variety of contexts that ECE services operate in, (b) demonstrably link to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and (c) align with various reporting needs of ECE services in order to bridge the gap between evidence and practice in formative assessment.

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