Early Years Twilight Seminar Video

How can we break down barriers to educators feeling confident about assessment?

I see the early childhood sector as having the potential to show the way in this.

So, I think it's frightening to go into the assessment space where we can see some problems that have arisen elsewhere and some ongoing conversations around those issues that are still not resolved.

One of the things that I love about researching and working in the early childhood sector is the prioritisation of relationships, the prioritisation of the focus on the whole child.

There's a lot of exciting stuff going on here and if we can find a way of doing assessment that fits with that model and tells us where the children are learning, when they're developing against these outcomes, then I think that's actually a really exciting opportunity.

Anything exciting has a little bit of fear with it, because it's new, because we're not sure exactly what it's going to look like yet.

But I think, as long as the sector holds true to those principles that are in the VEYLDF, I think there's a really great opportunity.

In the research I do in developing contexts, one of the challenges in developing contexts is the workforce, in the sense that often it's a volunteer workforce who are doing the best they can with low education, typically no pay.

And one of the bits of feedback I get time and time again is they want support in choosing what to do.

And so, the research I'm doing there is really focusing on saying, how do we integrate assessment into excellent clinical practice at all levels of ability?

So, that's about supporting educators to use assessment so they can locate a kid on a continuum and say, ‘This is what this kid is currently demonstrating they can do,’ and if I am not sure what I should do about that, then we should be hanging curriculum materials, pedagogical strategies off that continuum as well and say, we know in the science that, at this level of ability, here are the kind of interventions that work with these kids.

So, use these, or use these as the basis for your own planning and preparation.

Implement them for a month, two months, three months, whatever it is, and go back and use that assessment tool again and demonstrate, did the child grow in that area or not?

And if they didn't, you've got to change what you're doing, right? Or you've got to demonstrate that I know the family well enough, or the community well enough, to know there's a reason why that didn't work as I expected.

And I think, in those contexts,demonstrating that as a strategy to practise, will build esteem in the sector, might attract some salary, but will also demonstrate the worthof using assessment as part of practice.

Now.....I think it's different when you come to Australia, or a developed context, where things are a bit different, particularly around the skills and abilities of educators.

You know, many educators are brilliant practitioners who are very thoughtful about what they're doing.

But I still think that kind of approach could be used to nudge people in the direction of picking up strategies and approaches and put into their plan the science of work, to think about, you know, ‘OK, I know what I want to do, ‘but here's a way, and a really targeted, meaningful way to get some evidence about what we think is really effective.’

And again, you know, build a few case studies of people doing that and showing that it's an effective way of doing early education and that kids benefit from it, children really benefit from it, it'd be hard to stop people from wanting to pick it up all over the place.

One of my favourite words is 'reflection'. Critical reflection. It's throughout the national quality framework, it's throughout the VEYLDF. It's everywhere.

Everyone's doing it, and trying to work out exactly what it involves.

Now, if critical reflection doesn't at some point involve asking yourself, ‘Are the children that I'm educating and caring for learning anything?’ then I don't know what that critical reflection is, OK?

So, everybody's asking themselves these questions and evaluating whether their programs are working, what to do next, where's that child at, how can we extend that.

And I think contextualising assessment as an element of reflection brings it back to that thinking that assessment is not just a thing that you do to tick off - ‘Yep, I've assessed.’

Assessment is a thing that helps you think, as a practitioner, about your planning.

When you do that...

And it's back to what you said about going back to square one. Rather than, ‘Oh, I have to DO this assessment.

‘Well, I'm going to see what the guys down the road DID, and I'm going to DO that,’ it's the thinking - ‘What are they thinking about? Am I thinking about that? Is that the thing that I need to monitor for how my children are going? What does that assessment tool even measure? How does that relate to the VEYLDF?’

OK? That's thinking rather than doing. And I think that's where the gold is.

And it's possibly where the anxiety can get lessened, because it helps it be something that you're taking control of rather than just another thing you've got to tick off the list.