

CHAPTER 8

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIOCULTURAL ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

Assessments are a tool for social thinking and action. We suggest that in an early childhood or school setting this social thinking and action is of a particular kind and has a particular purpose: mutual feedback and dialogue about learning. Although assessment for this purpose is part of pedagogy and therefore can be ongoing and undocumented, this chapter is about documented assessment.

We take the view that learning and development, rather than being primarily about individual achievement, is distributed over, stretched across, people, places and things (Perkins, 1993; Salomon, 1993). This is a situated or sociocultural viewpoint about learning and development, one in which the early childhood centre or the classroom is seen as a 'community of learners' (Brown et al., 1993; Rogoff, 1990; Wenger, 1998), and in which teaching will target the learner-plus-the-surround. In James Wertsch's words, teaching and learning is about individual(s)-acting-with-mediational-means (Wertsch, 1991: 12) rather than individuals on their own, and so there is an emphasis on development as the transformation of participation in a range of contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 1997). To be consistent with this view of learning and development *assessment* needs to be distributed across people, places and things.

People refers to peers, teachers, families in the widest sense: their relationships with the learner, expectations, goals, prior knowledge and experience, and intuitions. *Places* refers to features of the classroom or early childhood setting, the centre or classroom atmosphere and organisational structures. *Things* refers to artefacts and materials. Given these general assumptions about learning, development and

assessment we have found that the consequences of documented assessments in early childhood can play out in three ways:

- Assessments act as a 'conscription device' (a recruitment) for participants, establishing the membership of a social *community* of learners and teachers: children, families and the staff team.
- Assessments are a means by which *competence* and competent learners are constructed.
- Assessments illustrate and support *continuity* in learning. They provide a venue for the negotiation and navigation of individual and collective learning trajectories. They invite participants to discuss what is being learned and to decide what might come next. This storying and restorying constructs multiple pathways of learning as 'work in progress'.

This chapter explains and illustrates each of these three clusters of consequence, using examples from New Zealand early childhood settings.

Community

Writing about classrooms, Roth and Roychoudhury (1994: 439) have suggested that concept maps act as a 'conscription device' that 'brings together individuals in a common task' and 'serves as a social glue between them'. Assessments can do this too. In terms of 'bringing individuals together in a common task' they can illustrate and influence the curriculum for participating children, teachers and families. In a study by Cowie (2000), Year 7–10 students (age 10–14) were emphatic that what would be 'in the test' guided what they did and learned. While this is a kind of 'hard conscription', a softer alternative is for participants to come to share and value similar goals. If we return to the French medieval meaning of conscription, as 'writing together', then conscription can refer to the co-construction of stories about learning and what is to be learned, jointly authored by learners and teachers. In the following example, Quin and her teacher write an assessment together, and Quin's conclusion refers to the learning that both teacher and learner might have gained.

Example

Quin draws a picture of her house and letterbox with a large 4 on it. She dictates an accompanying story to her childcare teacher who has difficulty with the street name, getting it wrong several times. The teacher finally looks it up and writes it correctly. The teacher's errors are written into the assessment record and a comment on the learning in this episode is also dictated by Quin: 'Everyone makes mistakes'.

Narrative assessments (written by teachers or families, dictated by children), particularly those accompanied by photographs, are especially good conscription devices. In New Zealand a number of early childhood centres are using 'learning stories' as a framework for assessment interactions (Carr, 2001a and b). This framework has been developed as a response to a socioculturally oriented national curriculum, as outlined in Chapter 1, in which the strands of outcome are well-being, belonging, communication, contribution and exploration: an emphasis on participation. 'Learning stories' are structured narratives that track children's strengths and interests: they emphasise the aim of early childhood as the development of children's identities as competent learners in a range of different arenas. They include an analysis of the learning (a 'short-term review') and a 'what next?' section. The narratives frequently include the interactions between teacher and learner, or between peers; often the episode is dictated by the learner as a 'child's voice'. The portfolios or folders in which they are housed invite families to contribute their own stories and comments.

The national curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*, leaves considerable opportunity for local 'weaving' (*Te Whāriki* means, in Maori, a woven mat) so the curriculum can be locally responsive (Carr and May, 1994) and achievement can be locally legitimated (Bishop and Glynn, 1999). The community may have a strong voice in the interpretation of such aims as 'belonging', 'contribution' and 'communication'. The following example illustrates a parent's role in shaping the curriculum through her contribution to the assessments.

Example

Andrew's mother wrote a contribution to his assessment portfolio describing a family day at an adventure park during the weekend. She described how he had the courage to have a go on the 'flying fox'. She then added, 'So I would like to see Andrew sharing his stories with his friends at the kindergarten mat time'. She interprets as part of the 'communication' strand of the curriculum an ability to stand up in front of peers and relate a story or an experience.

Andrew showed the teacher his mother's story and she then wrote the follow-up: 'We had a great discussion about the fun he had had on the flying fox and his visit to the park. I then suggested that he might like to draw or paint a picture about his great weekend and then we could write his story too. Andrew decided to draw a picture and went and collected paper and pens. As he created his picture he explained how the flying fox worked and I recorded his words. After I had finished writing Andrew said he would write his name. Andrew requested to share his story and his mum's story at mat time. He very proudly stood up the front with his file and picture. He told the children about his flying fox adventure and I read his story from his file.' A copy of the drawing and a photograph of Andrew telling the story was added to the portfolio as well.

Learning stories are designed to reflect and enhance reciprocal and responsive interactions and to develop and support atmospheres of trust and respect. They encourage children to be prepared to think about and to display their learning at appropriate times (a disposition associated with early literacy achievement emphasised by Susan Hill and colleagues (1998: 165) and Bronwen Cowie's research with students aged 10–14), and they encourage families to share their expectations and concerns. These documented, narrative and credit-based assessments crystallise the long-standing early childhood practice of describing and discussing what a child has done and achieved during the day – and of children taking home their paintings and models. Etienne Wenger (1998) describes this process of documentation as an example of 'reification': informal practice has been 'concretised' or reified.

A curriculum reified in written assessments that are accessible and detailed enables children and families to suggest developments and alternatives, to bring ideas and knowledge from home, and to clarify teachers' interpretations. In this way the assessment both enlists participation and is jointly constructed as an artefact of the community of practice. In the following example, a parent adds an analysis to a learning story.

Example

Vini, aged 4, tells the teachers that his mother needs new slippers. He makes a pair for her (with much measuring and gluing and decorating), and when the teachers write this up their assessment emphasises Vini's developing identity as a 'caring' and thoughtful person. His mother contributes a comment to the assessment folder that adds a reference to the technical expertise that this work illustrated: she writes that the slippers Vini made were 'unbelievable in terms of thoughtfulness and technical perfection for a little child'.

Research indicates the power of family expectations on learning achievement and on what could and should be achieved (Frome and Eccles, 1998). Documented assessment makes learning visible in ways that can provide opportunities for negotiation and families may revise their 'folk' (Olson and Bruner, 1996) assumptions. Radford (2001) described a parent making a contribution to her son's kindergarten portfolio. One of the stories the parent chose to write about was of Tom making a card for his Nan in which he wanted to draw a 'gust of wind' and persevered until he was satisfied. The parent commented that writing stories for the portfolio led her to 'stop and really look' at her view of valued learning in early childhood:

'Cause you just get on with ordinary everyday life, and you start taking things for granted about them, whereas this sort of thing [being invited to contribute to the assessment folder] makes you stop and really look, and think about "oh ... yes that's really interesting". Or that's quite a big learning step for them, by doing what they did, or what they said.'

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The same parent commented about her response to the early childhood centre's learning stories: 'It's really made me realise, and I'm so glad, 'cause now I'm quite happy to do more fun things with Tom, and don't care if we don't do what I used to call "learning".' She had revised her views of what is involved in school readiness. Documentation or data collection can also prompt teachers to revise their assumptions about children in their classrooms or early childhood centres (Timperley and Robinson, 2001).

Competence

Etienne Wenger has this to say about competence within a community (1998: 152):

When we are with a community of practice of which we are a full member, we are in familiar territory. We can handle ourselves competently. We experience competence and we are recognised as competent.

From the perspective of the early childhood centre as a community of learners or a community of practice, the major goals and outcomes of learning are not primarily the collection of skills and knowledge but are 'successful participation in socially organized activity and the development of students' identities as learners' (Greeno, 1997: 9). Gipps (2002), writing about sociocultural approaches to assessment, comments that 'assessment plays a key role in identity formation, in particular because of its public nature'. Writers on assessment remind us that students bring models of learning and of the self as a learner which may be an obstacle to their own learning (Purdie and Hattie, 1996). Black and Wiliam comment that 'There is evidence from many studies that learners' beliefs about their capacity as learners can affect their achievement' (1998: 24).

What might developing 'identities as learners' mean? We suggest that there are three possible facets to this popular idea: identifying with a range of sociocultural roles, developing learning dispositions towards participation, and becoming a self-assessor.

Identifying with a wide range of sociocultural roles

In a learning community children will have the opportunity to take up a range of sociocultural roles and acquire their associated skills, knowledges and attitudes: teacher, student, friend, measurer, jam-maker, tower-builder, painter, observer of insects, reader. In the following example, Tyler-Jackson is a teacher for Tenaya. Some time later, Tenaya takes on the same sort of teacher role for Sean.

In a setting where the curriculum is woven locally or 'permeable' (Comber, 2000), children set curriculum goals for each other. In the following example, Tyler-Jackson has taught Tenaya that peers help each other here, in the same way as teachers assist children. The documentation reifies this as a valued curriculum goal.

Example

On 23 August an entry in Tyler-Jackson's assessment folder records his assistance to Tenaya. Tyler-Jackson is 27 months old. Tenaya [20 months] is sitting in a high-chair with her lunch box on the table beside her. Tyler-Jackson opens Tenaya's lunch box and offers her raisins. She shakes her head. He offers her yoghurt. She nods and reaches out with both hands. Tyler-Jackson struggles but takes off the foil top and puts it on the high-chair tray. He then walks towards the cupboard saying "Soon, soon [spoon, spoon]". "Tyler-Jackson, do you want a spoon?" He nods and points to Tenaya. I give Tyler-Jackson the spoon and say "Did you give Tenaya her yoghurt and open it for her?" He nods – walks towards Tenaya and says "No fig as [fingers]", takes the yoghurt off the tray, gives the spoon to Tenaya then puts the yoghurt back on the tray and says "Soon, soon". [The teacher's analysis of the learning lists the following: took responsibility for others, met the needs of another before his own, followed a sequence of events: opened lunch box, offered choices, opened yoghurt and got spoon.] On 12 September an entry in Tenaya's folder records the following: Tenaya walks over to Sean in the high chair, gives him his lunch box, opens it and takes out the raisins. Sean holds out his hands. Tenaya asks, "Raisins?" Tenaya opens the box and takes out some of the raisins and puts them on the tray in front of Sean. (There is some difficulty but she succeeds.) When Sean has taken three raisins she gives him more, puts the box of raisins back in Sean's lunch box and pulls out the sandwiches wrapped in glad wrap ... She separates one sandwich and gives it to him.'

Tyler-Jackson is also teaching Tenaya that at lunchtime the rule with yoghurt is 'spoons, no fingers'. Assessments recognise role models from the community outside the classroom as well:

Example

In a group learning story, written for each child who participated in a tapa-making project at a centre, the children are reminded of the work of a Pacific nations artist by the inclusion of a photo of the artist and his work, together with some background information of interest to families. The teacher wrote: 'The children were very interested in discussing how tapa was traditionally made as well as what motivated the artists in making their designs.' [Tapa is a cloth made from fibre, traditionally decorated in geometric blocks.]

Through interactions with peers children also construct their own communities and explore a range of social identities (being a 'good girl' for instance – Carr, 2001a, 2001b). Adults, however, will want to offer alternatives, assuming that education is about 'suggesting new directions in which lives may go' (Donaldson, 1992: 259).

Developing learning dispositions towards participation

In a learning community children will have the opportunity to explore and to take up a range of learning dispositions. The learning story assessment format is framed around learning dispositions or participation repertoires: being ready, willing and able to, for instance, take an interest and be involved, tackle difficulty and persist when the outcome is uncertain, share ideas with others and take responsibility. Portfolios can track such learning dispositions. The following is a comment from a parent about deep involvement and persistence.

Example

Neeve has been focused and involved at her childcare centre in making dinosaurs in a range of media over some time. Just before she goes to school, her mother commented in her portfolio on 'How intensely she applied herself to the task and how quickly she learnt'. In another context she wrote: 'Robyn [one of the teachers], I think I understand what you said the other day about Neeve using her learning strategies in other areas of learning! Neeve wanted to tie up her shoelace and I showed her how. She practised and practised and practised and in the morning she said, "Look, Mummy I can do up my shoe lace!" And she could.'

In this way assessment serves to strengthen children's identifications as learners across a range of contexts in ways that benefit and avoid harm to learning dispositions or habits of mind (Crooks, 1993).

Becoming a self-assessor

James and Prout (1997: ix), writing about constructing and reconstructing childhood, comment that 'it is now more common to find acknowledgement that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture than a precursor to it; and that children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such'. Young children are very capable of self-assessment. Confident self-assessment of what constitutes a valid and valued learning contribution or question is crucial if students are to participate spontaneously as members of a community of learners.

Example

A 4-year-old is hula-hooping and says to the teacher: 'Write about my moves. I keep wriggling to keep it moving. When it goes low I have to go faster, see?' [The teacher does write about the hula-hooping moves and the child's analysis of these. She also takes photographs illustrating the hoop both high and low.]

In early childhood settings where learning and assessment are distributed across and legitimated by *things*, activities and materials, the criteria for successful learning are embedded in the actions. Completing jigsaws is a classic example of an activity that provides feedback about success; so is an activity like making a hat that fits the maker (Carr, 2000a), or a toddler learning to climb into a swing. Activities with this autotelic quality are often accessible and engaging for children and they play a key role in fostering children's agency by maintaining their independence from teacher judgement.

Claxton (1995: 340) points out that many goals in education are developed by learners as they go along, and many of them are hidden from the adult observer. This is especially the case in early childhood:

It is striking that the focus here [in a paper in a journal] is predominantly on evaluation of the work with respect to criteria that are largely external, explicit, predetermined and generalized. What is excluded here is all the situations in which learners are developing their sense of what counts as 'good work' for themselves – where it is some inner sense of satisfaction which is the touchstone of 'quality'; where the sense of 'quality' is an holistic matter of taste, 'nose' or intuition, rather than the application of rules; where the sense of what it is that one is trying to achieve develops and changes in the course of the learning itself – where the goal is at least partly revealed as you go along, rather than being clearly specified in advance; where the criteria are specific to a piece of work. (Claxton, 1995: 340)

In the following example, the teacher records an occasion in which Lauren appears to be developing her sense of what counts as 'good work' where the goal was not clearly specified in advance.

Example

Lauren is screen-printing, and the teacher records her comments throughout the process. 'As she was drawing she said almost to herself, "I'll have to concentrate" and she did.' When she aligned a second template (a basket) over an earlier print (a cat) and made a second print: 'She looked at it and said "Oh no! That's not right! The cat needs to be in the basket, not up there!" She tried again, and when she aligned basket and cat to her satisfaction, and added a few more items to the picture, she commented "I like that".'

Documented assessments can also contribute to children's appreciation of what is valued and what they have accomplished.

Example

A parent's contribution to Charlotte's assessments comments: 'Charlotte is very proud of her folder ... she took it home and couldn't wait to show her sister as soon as she got out of school and then all our family who came to visit at the weekend. She wanted to talk us through every aspect!'

The process of documenting assessment through jointly authored storying highlights for teachers and parents the scope of children's appreciation and analysis of their own learning.

Continuity

The literature on formative assessment concerns itself mostly with an assessment's capacity to shape learning pathways. Often that pathway is defined by reference to levels or standards. For Sadler (1989), for instance, the formative 'shaping and improving the student's competence' means closing a 'gap' between an actual level of competence and a reference level. As teachers and students learn to recognise a fine performance, 'feedback' provides a means for bridging the gap between this and the student's current performance. However, where pathways are developed with reference to 'developing identities as competent learners' – expertise in a range of available sociocultural models, increasingly complex and wide-ranging participation repertoires, and the pursuit of personal and locally collective goals – then such pathways will be multidirectional, locally contextualised and emergent. It is unlikely that many of them will be available with universal, national or completely prescribed reference levels and standards.

With this proviso, documented learning pathways can provide platforms for further learning. In New Zealand early childhood settings, for instance, many portfolios or folders record continuity in children's participation in the community as children become more 'at home': their developing sense of belonging. One parent noted on her baby's record the day she came that the baby was absorbed in a music activity and didn't 'drop everything and cry if Mum doesn't pick me up immediately'. Support for continuity is important as children explore what it means to build relationships, develop and express ideas and seek to make sense of their environment. Maria, in the next example, is reviewing her art portfolio for the previous months.

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Example

Maria's folder includes the following: 'I showed Maria her folio, which contained all of her *kowhaiwhai* designs [completed over a number of months]. She was very excited to see all of her work displayed and looked through her work, examining it closely.' Comments from Maria included: recall about the process, the context (one of her sketches was drawn during a *marae* visit), the similarity in designs over time, and a criticism of one of her paintings (a small section of the design had not been painted). The collection included background information on *kowhaiwhai* patterns and Maria identified the '*kaperua*' pattern that another child had painted. The teacher commented that Maria finds patterns throughout the environment, and a written contribution from Maria's mother recounted a story about Maria's recognition of *kowhaiwhai* patterns at the mother's workplace. [*Kowhaiwhai* patterns are a type of frieze that appears in maori architecture.]

Here is an example in which the teacher remembers previous learning stories in which Harry has made elaborate frames for his drawings and paintings. She calls on this prior experience to suggest some continuity.

Example

A learning story in Harry's portfolio starts in this way: 'Harry has done three small pastel drawings and Jo and I were admiring them with Harry: "Perhaps you could frame them?", I suggest to Harry (thinking about his previous learning stories)? "Yeah!" says Harry.' [He does so, with much decision-making and measuring.]

Frequently a parent will provide some of the continuity. In the next example, a parent contributes to an accumulation of evidence of rich and intertwined individual and collective learning.

Example

Parent contribution to Tane's folder: 'Tane has had an ongoing enthusiasm for sewing projects following a session at kindy [kindergarten] where he used a needle and thread for the first time. With his Mum-mum [grandmother] he made a bag with button decorations and pictured above is the apron he made last week ... The biggest challenge was coming to grips with having to finish each seam with some kind of knot to keep it all together.' Tane's folder records the development of this enthusiasm and these skills at the early childhood centre over time, together with the involvement

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of other children: his mastery of a sewing machine, his drawing of patterns, his discussion with Sarah about the best fabric for the job, his sewing of an outfit, a motorcycle helmet, and, together with two other children, a decorated jacket.

In the learning story framework, a 'what next?' section prompts consideration of the possibilities for further learning. It is designed to refer to the past and the present to encourage consideration of where to go next by providing a space for this to be discussed between children and teachers (and, perhaps, families). In the following example, the teacher contributes a tentative note to the goals for the next step.

Example

Isaac and a group of children have been reading a book about space with the teacher. Isaac decides to make an 'alien' out of green card 'cos aliens are green'. In the 'What next?' section of the assessment the teacher has written the following: 'Keep supporting and extending his interest in Space, which is encouraging him to try new things (using the art area resources) and practise exploring his imagination and communicating his ideas. We have downloaded pictures of planets off the Internet for him, bought new books, and been playing the "Planet" CD for the children to listen to. The term break may have some effect on the interest, so we will have to wait and see if this is still topical when he comes back. A little "provocation" (alien footprints in the family area perhaps, or a trip to the Star Dome), may help trigger something ... who knows?'

Learning trajectories documented in this way are not 'deeply coded' (Sadler, 1989) in the way grades or marks might be. Sadler adds that if feedback information is too deeply coded (i.e. as summative grades), it can be difficult for learners to monitor their learning pathway. Rather, they are designed to be accessible to learners and their families. They represent teachers' professional understandings but couched as they are in tentative terms they encourage dialogue and support a view of learning as ongoing. Although in early childhood grading is unusual, baseline assessments at school entry may use grading, and these assessments have the potential to powerfully influence the opportunities to learn in the year before school entry. When one of the aims for early childhood education and, we could argue, education for life-long learning (Carr and Claxton, 2002) is learning dispositions and participation repertoires, then assessment that itself encourages the learner's desire to learn by documenting interest, involvement, persistence, communication and responsibility will contribute to the emergence of a disposition towards 'learning goals' rather than 'performance goals' (Ames, 1992; Smiley and Dweck, 1994). Assessments that call on reference levels or standards that children and families have not understood or legitimated are likely to shift this orientation towards *performance* goals: an interest in 'being right', not being discovered to be unable, a reluctance to risk making an error.

Conclusion

In early childhood settings that take a 'distributed' view of curriculum and assessment, assessments will call on criteria that will be emergent, situated, student- or child-referenced and negotiated. The assessment process will acknowledge those occasions when children have their own sense of satisfaction in a task well done, using their own (frequently hidden) criteria. They will reflect the balances that have been struck between discussion and documentation, between participation and reification, in providing feedback to learners and their families and in suggesting what the next step might look like. And they will provide avenues for all participants to achieve a considerable measure of access, ownership and legitimation. This level of active engagement poses a challenge for teachers who are more used to top-down curriculum and assessment processes. In New Zealand, curriculum policy initiatives in the school sector have set up an alignment between five key competencies in the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the five strands of *Te Whariki*, the early childhood curriculum. This provides new possibilities for the documentation of learning trajectories from early childhood to school and therefore for collaborative discussions on children's learning and assessment that use a common language. This recognition of the continuity of learning experience is important when the vision is the development of dispositions for life-long learning. Learning stories as a socio-cultural assessment practice are being explored in international projects where learning dispositions are of interest (for example, Leau et al., 2007).

Sociocultural assessment practices are complex and dynamic and are therefore a challenge for teachers. In recent years, the authors of this chapter have been involved in the development of assessment exemplars for the early childhood sector that illustrate the practice of sociocultural assessment (Carr et al., 2004). Three of the exemplar books illustrate and provide theoretical underpinning for the three clusters of consequences in this chapter. These exemplars have been designed to act as a prescription device to establish a *community* of early childhood teachers who want to talk about learning and assessment. They aim to be permeable: providing social spaces for new *competencies* in assessment. Finally, they invite teachers to think about *continuity* in their own learning around assessment: to set up dialogue opportunities within their own settings as they adapt formats and try out new ideas. Sociocultural assessment practices distribute responsibility for assessment across the early years community, local and national.

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