Chapter 6 Assessment for learning: Promoting children's rights and social justice

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Introduction

Assessment for learning approaches are powerful influences on the development and attainment of learners. Teachers and families know this, and research has provided supporting evidence (for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie, 2008; Stobart, 2008). Related to both development and attainment, assessment for learning can play a role in supporting and promoting children's rights and social justice. In this chapter we set out five principles of assessment in education that promote learning and, at the same time, support and promote children's rights and social justice, acknowledging the work of Aotearoa New Zealand's Professor Anne Smith.

The first principle is that an assessment practice should describe a learning journey—monitoring progress over time, connecting the past to the present and looking to the future. The second principle flows from this: it is helpful if the learning outcomes to be assessed can take cognisance of a facilitating educational environment and have some consistency across the span of early childhood education and schooling.

The third relates to the contribution of assessment to learner motivation, with self-efficacy as a desired consequence. The fourth is that the assessment practice itself should include a shared process: active participation ensuring assessment is one of the primary means for developing the agency of the learner. Finally, we advocate for, and provide examples of, assessment as effective and trustworthy feedback.

Each principle is introduced with a quotation from Anne Smith's writing. We refer mainly to early years' practice in Aotearoa New Zealand at the present time as a context, although these principles apply to all levels of education.

Principle 1: An assessment practice should describe a learning journey, monitoring progress over time

> The most important goal of assessment [is] strengthening children's learning identities and their motivation for ongoing learning. The sensitive and informed use of assessment is an important aspect of effective classroom and early childhood practice, because it influences what students think is important to learn, their motivation and their self-belief. (Smith, 2013, p. 257)

Three frames of reference are used in educational assessments: normative, standards-based and ipsative. The normative approach compares the relative performance of different learners: reporting place in class is a familiar example. The standards-based approach compares the performance of each learner to described standards of performance, such as New Zealand's National Standards for primary school performance in reading, writing and mathematics, or some of the standards for awarding NCEA[1] credits in the latter years of secondary education. The ipsative approach compares the current performance of a learner to his or her previous performance, with a clear focus on identifying and describing the extent of progress the learner has made.

To achieve the goal of helping to improve the performance and motivation of every learner, which is our focus here, the most important way of describing assessed performance is to make comparisons with earlier performance (the ipsative approach). When the approach includes positive achievements it can strengthen children's learning identities and their

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1   National Certificate of Educational Achievement.

motivation for ongoing learning. In early childhood education—and often in schools, too—assessments are housed in individual portfolios, enabling learners, teachers and families to review the learning journey so far; to celebrate progress and consider future actions and endeavours. Some schools have used 'split-screen' analyses to assess both the subject requirements and the key competencies. For examples of the uses of portfolios in schools, see Chetcuti and Grima (2001) and Brady (2004).

Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 87) state that "to be effective, feedback needs to be clear, purposeful, meaningful and compatible with students' prior knowledge and to provide logical connections". In their model, effective feedback must answer three questions: 'Where am I going?', 'How am I going?' and 'Where to next?' They also caution against what Torrance and Pryor (1998) describe as criteria compliance, whereby ticking off objectives and criteria takes on a greater importance than the learning itself, and where feedback is overly directive. They also make the point that any feedback should be about the student's work rather than the student.

It is important to point out that Hattie and Timperley (2007) found that praise, on its own, was the least effective type of feedback because students could learn nothing from it. Eleanore Hargreaves (2011) writes about provocative feedback which aims to get the learner to think deeply, question him- or herself, have new ideas, reflect on the learning and take action. It encourages learners to self-regulate by discovering for themselves where learning has been successful and to share good strategies with their peers.

Principle 2: In order to describe a learning journey, it is helpful if learning outcomes to be assessed can take cognisance of a facilitating educational environment and have some consistency across the span of early childhood education and schooling

> Our curriculum in New Zealand is Te Whāriki, published in 1996 and compulsory for registered ECE centers in New Zealand … [It] is based on sociocultural, bicultural, and holistic principles, and has a deliberate focus on incorporating children's and families' voices. (Smith, 2016, p. 56)

The goals and outcomes for early childhood and school-level education in New Zealand are captured in two curriculum documents: for early childhood in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and for school in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). These documents currently retain strong support from the relevant education agencies and professional bodies. They address a wide range of knowledge, skills/competencies, attitudes/values and dispositions. They are unique internationally in that the early childhood strands of outcome in *Te Whāriki* are paralleled in the school curriculum's key competencies. The alignment of the curricula is as follows: wellbeing/managing self, belonging/participating and contributing, exploration/thinking, communication/using language symbols and texts, contribution/relating to others.

The relative emphasis on subject-based and competency-based outcomes and goals is constantly being contested and revisited, however. For instance, the apparent discretion and flexibility that *The New Zealand Curriculum* offered to individual teachers and schools was substantially curtailed by the publishing of National Standards for reading, writing and mathematics and the associated statements about how much of the school week should be devoted to student development in these particular areas. Those new standards and guidelines did not directly contradict statements in the curriculum about the importance of five key competencies, nor did they explicitly devalue learning in other areas of the curriculum. However, they did strongly nudge the balance of the school curriculum towards some goals, and by implication suggest less attention be paid to other goals.

In the early childhood context, the sociocultural, bicultural and holistic framing of *Te Whāriki* insists on the connection between learning and a learning environment. In effect, learning in the early years is described as wellbeing *in*, belonging *to*, exploration *of*, communication *for* and contribution *to*. This acknowledges that it is the child plus the environment that does the learning, consistent with the curriculum principles in *Te Whāriki* that "the early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic ways children learn and grow" and "children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people places and things".

David Perkins (2009) writes in a similar way about a theory of learning as "an integrative theory of action" (p. 18). In the early childhood

sector it has been recognised that this relational or integrative defining of aims and objectives in *Te Whāriki* was most accurately translated into assessment by using a narrative format, where the learning and the affordances are assessed together as *learning stories* (Carr & Lee, 2012). Learning stories now support *Te Whāriki* in a range of early childhood programmes, languages and countries (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013). They give strength to the philosophy of assessment *for learning* because they include a 'What next?' that may include the learner, the learning opportunity, or both. Exemplars of these narrative assessments have been published by the Ministry of Education in a series of 20 books (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2005, 2009). More recently, schools have responded to the challenge of combining the demands of subjects and key competencies by using learning stories in the early years, with an eye to the early development of a holistic *learner identity* (Davis, Wright, Carr, & Peters, 2013).

Principle 3: Self-efficacy as a desired consequence of assessment

> Self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one's ability to achieve a task, which influences how hard they try to succeed at a task, how long they persist with it and whether they can achieve the learning outcome. (Smith, 2013, p. 56)

This principle is about paying close attention to individual differences. Three reasons sit behind it: the range of capabilities within most typical groups of learners is very large; good learning progress is most likely to happen when learning activities are appropriate to current levels of capability; and self-efficacy is about motivation.

Even though they may all be of similar age, it is normal to find *some children performing at levels typical of substantially older learners* and others *performing at levels typical of substantially younger learners*. These differences can arise from differences in inherited capabilities or aptitudes, but are at least as likely to arise from differences in life experience. For instance, learners who have been exposed to a rich range of musical experiences, perhaps at home or through community organisations such as churches, are likely to have more advanced capabilities in performing music or responding to music. Similarly, those who have had a lot of

experience in playing with balls are likely to be more skilled in such skills as catching, throwing, kicking or hitting balls. Those who have had extensive exposure to a rich range of a language through oral communication, being read to, listening to performances in the language and developing reading skills themselves are likely to be comparatively advanced in skills with that language. These deviations from the average capabilities within a group of learners indicate clearly that assessment of development and learning in each learning domain should begin by assessing the initial capability and performance, and then move on to monitoring and supporting progress from the initial assessment.

Good learning progress is most likely to happen when learning activities are *appropriate to current levels of capability*. Tasks that are already well within the capabilities of a learner are unlikely to promote further learning, while tasks that are far ahead of the current capabilities are more likely to foster frustration rather than growth.

The third reason for paying full attention to individual differences centres on *learner motivation*. Scholars working in this area, such as Carol Dweck (1986, 2006) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997), have identified the strong learning momentum that becomes possible when learners work on tasks they see as quite challenging but not impossible. There is little point in asking a young piano student with quite limited skills to try to learn to perform a Mozart sonata, but for a more advanced student the same request might be a stimulating and rewarding challenge. Motivation is a key consideration in learning and development: little will be achieved without motivation, so creating conditions favourable to learner motivation is a high priority in educational settings.

Anne Smith (2013) elaborated on this point. She referred to Dale Schunk (2004), who described self-efficacy as a subjective perception of what a person thinks they can do in a specific domain, although it is not the same as knowing what to do. She went on to explain that self-efficacy is influenced by past experience, such as teacher expectations and judgements, feedback and modelling (by the teacher or peers). She concluded that choosing a very competent peer is not necessarily the best strategy, because self-efficacy (including notions of resilience and perseverance) is more likely to be enhanced by seeing another person overcome initial struggle. She suggested that other ways in which

teachers can improve children's self-efficacy are through encouraging actions or thoughts associated with it.

For all of the reasons above, appropriate recognition of and responsiveness to individual differences is a very high priority and is central to the effectiveness of assessment processes.

Principle 4: Assessment as a shared process

> Children's voices, as well as those of their families, are included in learning stories allowing children to share meanings and ownership of their learning. Children's rights, to express and share their views (Articles 12 and 13 [in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child]), are embedded in *Te Whāriki*, and it provides an excellent model of a curriculum that incorporates children's participation rights. (Smith, 2016, p. 56)

Much of the literature on testing and assessment appears to regard them as activities that teachers do to their students. But here, where we are talking about assessment as a way of promoting educational quality, that is too limited a view. Successful assessment procedures use enhanced feedback, encourage students to be actively involved in the learning, use assessment results to enhance learning and teaching, and support learners towards self-assessment (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003; Clarke, Timperley, & Hattie, 2001).

A core ingredient of assessment that helps development and learning is the active participation of the learners. The most influential scholar in developing and promoting this idea has been Royce Sadler. In his seminal paper in 1989 he emphasised that the active involvement of learners in self-assessment is a vital component of effective assessment for learning and development. For useful change to happen, a learner needs both to recognise the desirability of change and to begin to see how to change. Clearly, teachers and peers can help with both of these requirements, but self-recognition and self-commitment are vital ingredients for effective change. Wynne Harlen and Mary James (1997) have summarised Sadler's point nicely:

> pupils have to be active in their own learning (teachers cannot learn for them) and unless they come to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and how they might deal with them, they will not make progress. (p. 372)

Becoming proficient in self-assessment has two main requirements: developing understanding of the qualities that are associated with good or excellent performances in the tasks or area concerned, and developing skills in identifying how well those qualities are shown in one's own work. Converting these building blocks into improved performance requires a third element: the motivation/commitment to make the effort to bridge any gaps between the current performance and the recognised qualities that should be sought. Dylan Wiliam (2009) refers to a colleague from Kings' College who used to refer to "plenty of formative intention but relatively little formative action" (p. 9). This observation, which applies to both learners and teachers, differentiates between the intention to take action and actually taking the necessary action to improve performance.

Isaacs, Zara, Herbert, Coombs and Smith (2013) support the view that continuous assessment can provide a holistic approach to assessment as well as immediate and effective feedback to both the learner and the practitioner about the learner's strengths and areas that need further development. They also point out that:

> such an approach requires a commitment from all staff to the implementation of the approach in an agreed format. Staff need to be skilled users of a variety of assessment instruments, skilled interpreters of the evidence that is generated and skilled recorders of the data. Staff may need training in the use and implementation of such systems. (p. 36)

John Hattie (2008) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) have shown that educators can play a key role in promoting development and learning through their feedback on learners' work. Provided that learners want to perform better, such feedback can serve two key functions: to help learners better understand what a good performance looks like, and to help them identify the aspects of their current work that need improvement. If these conditions are met, there is a strong chance that improvement will follow.

There are usually further important players in the learning environment: the other learners. There is strong evidence (Nuthall, 1999; Alton-Lee, Nuthall, & Patrick, 1993) that the observations and feedback offered by peers can play a strong role in learning and development.

Their affirmations and suggestions can be very helpful. On the other hand, their negative comments can undermine the conditions that favour motivation and progress.

Particularly with younger children, parents and other family members are further powerful influences on progress in learning and development. Their interest, time committed and responses to what learners are doing are often important signals to the learners about the importance and merit of what they have been working on and can reinforce or undermine the influence of teachers and peers.

Principle 5: Effective feedback and guidance includes trustworthiness

> Quality is deeply embedded in the engagement of adults and children together, but from a rights perspective, the core aspect of quality is listening to children's voice and perspectives and taking them seriously. (Smith, 2016, p. 59)

Effective guidance requires an atmosphere of trust. Learners receiving guidance from an educator or a peer will respond most positively to that guidance if they trust the person who is offering it. They need to be confident that the person genuinely cares about them and has their interests at heart. This allows them to reveal the difficulties or doubts they are having, and therefore to maximise opportunities for their helpers to understand their needs and offer really useful help.

Usually, effective guidance has the character of a conversation. There is clear evidence that learners are more open to feedback if they are able to explain why they have done what they have done, and to indicate what they think they have done well, indifferently or poorly. This gives the person offering guidance clues to what will be most appropriate to say to help the person they are guiding. Few of us enjoy simply being told what to do, without any sense of personal agency or control!

Guidance is most effective if it is offered when learners receiving the guidance are actively engaged with the tasks on which they are receiving feedback and feel they can receive tangible benefit from paying attention to the guidance and acting upon it. This is especially the case when the learning activity is part of an extended sequence of similar work, so that there will be multiple opportunities to incorporate improvements into the learning activities and products.

A 3-year longitudinal observational and interview study of 4- and 5-year-olds (in their New Zealand childhood centres and schools), entitled Learning in the Making, was co-authored by Anne Smith. This study used episodes of 10 minutes or more as "thematic or functional" units of analysis to analyse the development of dispositional learning over time (a way of including, in research, the learners together with the affordances). We quote from this book to illustrate principle 5:

> The teachers' efforts to know all the children well and develop relationships with them invited their engagement and interest in activities at the centre. Teachers and their attitudes, and their facilitation of children's projects, were a key aspect of the affordance network. David, for example, was able to build on the early childhood teacher's belief that children can take responsibility for their own learning. (Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee, & Marshall, 2010, p. 117)

Concluding comments

This chapter has discussed formative assessment with a focus on the early years, and has used examples from Aotearoa New Zealand. Formative assessment is about evoking information about learning and using that information to improve learning (Black et al., 2003, p. 122), and we have argued that five considerations (described as principles) should accompany the formative role of assessment if a key purpose of education is deemed to be social justice and children's rights. There is no better scholarly work for enunciating that key purpose than the writing of Anne B. Smith. Her 2016 book was entitled *Children's Rights: Towards Social Justice*. That book concludes with a quote from John Tobin (2011, p. 89):

> The mainstreaming of children's rights is a deeply political project with potentially transformative consequences for the way in which children are engaged with by all actors in society.

We agree, and we suggest that the way we assess children in education is a key site for working on that project.

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