The Fence

or exploring the challenges of sociocultural assessment

Sarah Te One

Introduction

It is not easy to assess young children's learning, and the competing interests of how to manage, how to document, and how to plan do not always complement one another. Very often, managing the job is done at the expense of thinking and discussing. The technical "how to?" questions dominate the "what's going on here?" and "why?" questions that inject uncertainty and ambiguity into discussion of assessment. In this article, to draw out some of the debates about assessment in early childhood that contribute to "keeping it complex", I present the documentation of one centre that is comfortable with keeping the fences down, not up, and where ambiguity is part of the answer to the question of "where to next?".

A focus on compliance

For the past few years, the focus in early childhood has been on compliance, with a strong emphasis on assessing individual children. The 1996 *Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices* (DOPS) stated:

> 3. Educators should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the learning and development of each child, identify learning goals for individual children, and use this information as a basis for planning, evaluating and improving curriculum programmes. (New Zealand Gazette)

This resulted in a degree of confusion for many teachers, who assumed that it meant the Education Review Office required them to produce individual plans for children. A year later, *Quality in Action* (Ministry of Education, 1998), a resource developed to support the implementation of DOPS, clarified this by interpreting it to mean "set learning objectives for individual children and groups of children based on the results of observation and analysis" (p. 30).

There is evidence to suggest that compliance issues have had the effect of directing teacher attention to the curriculum strands (Te One, 2002). Assessments of children are often categorised as "Exploration" or "Communication", with sometimes a narrower analysis linking the assessment to a goal stated in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1993, 1996), which is then translated into a planning objective. If used like this, *Te Whāriki* becomes little better than a checklist, and the role of the teacher as a reflective practitioner is diminished.

However, in many cases assessment includes documentation (Alcock, 2001), often in narrative form, which conveys interest, learning, and progress to a range of audiences, including the child. In other words, the documentation, be it written, oral, photographic, or pictorial, attempts to establish some common meaning for those concerned. The child may gain some insight into himself or herself as a learner, or even as a teacher. The teacher should gain some insight into the child, not just about what is learnt but about the child as a learner, and also into the wider context in which the learning took place. This adds an intuitive dimension to assessment (Broadfoot, 2000) that makes it complex because it introduces a degree of ambiguity to discussions about learning and planning for learning. Teachers' professional conversations encompass such slippery concepts as artistry (Eisner, 1985; cited in Carr, Cowie, Gerrity, et al., 2001), responsiveness, and wise, thoughtful practice (Goodfellow, 2001)—qualities that contribute to pedagogical decisions about children and learning.

Such conversations can also raise important questions about views of children as powerless or powerful that have significant implications for the role of the teacher, especially if she or he is the main arbiter of assessment:

> We need to bring out into the open the nature of the power relationship in teaching and assessment and point out the possibility of reconstructing this relationship. Perhaps most important, we need to encourage teachers to bring pupils into the process of assessment, in order to recognise their social and cultural background, and into self assessment, in order to develop their evaluative and metacognitive skills. (Gipps, 1999, p. 387)

Assessment is difficult, and more so with young children, because they are still learning the cultural tools of language and communication. It remains a challenge for teachers to articulate this, let alone document it, because there are usually multiple pathways to follow in response to children's learning.

New assessment requirements

Several key tensions exist in assessment debates at a theoretical level. While standard-

ised tests have been largely rejected by the early childhood sector, for well-documented reasons, the alternative is more complex and difficult to define. It takes us into the realm of sociocultural theory, where "the basic goal … is to create an account of human mental processes" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 6; cited in Gipps, 1999, p. 373). This is indeed the challenge of sociocultural assessment in early childhood.

Partly in response to this challenge, interest in the possibilities and potentials of formative assessment has been increasing. The definitions of this term are varied and make interesting reading. Bronwen Cowie's (2000; cited in Carr et al., 2001) research developed a framework for formative assessment that uses three key stages: notice, recognise, and respond. All three stages imply reflection. *Te Whāriki* emphasises reflection—it is integral to curriculum and to assessment practices—and this fits with the definition of formative assessment. But, as with any approach to assessment, the benefits and the pitfalls need to be signalled. A central issue is who holds the balance of power. To counter such concerns, the learning story/teaching story model of assessment includes a child's voice, a teacher's voice, and a parent voice, all of which contribute to the overall assessment at any one time (Carr, May, and Podmore, 2001; Podmore, May, and Carr, 1998).

This approach reconceptualises assessment and fits with an interpretation of the *Te Whāriki* framework as a reconceptualist curriculum because it re-presents existing theoretical knowledge in a uniquely New Zealand way that acknowledges bicultural and multicultural influences. It is not purely developmental, nor is it purely sociocultural or constructivist in origin. In fact, the tall kauri trees—Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky, and Erikson—used as signposts for *Te Whāriki* make that very point, hence one reason for the metaphor of an interwoven conceptual framework for curriculum. The implications for assessment should therefore be reconceptualised too (Cannella, 1997). How this looks in reality is the question.

The challenge of reconceptualising assessment

The challenge of the sociocultural approach to assessment is enormous. Two issues come to mind: first, how to assess process as process and not product; and second, it can involve assessment of experiences beyond the walls of the centre, within a community "that recognises the essential relations between these processes and their cultural, historical and institutional settings" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 6; cited in Gipps, 1999, p. 373). This might happen in several contexts in a centre where assessment within the framework of sociocultural theory is seen as interactive, dynamic, and collaborative. Rather than an external and formalised activity, assessment is integral to the teaching process and embedded in the social and cultural life of the classroom. (Gipps, 1999, p. 378)

Assessment and communities of learners

The implications of sociocultural theories for teaching and assessing are complex because society, history, and culture are complex. A purpose for assessment claimed by Carr et al. (2001) is to strengthen communities of learners. Barbara Rogoff has investigated this concept. She presents a case for the model of a community of learners as an alternative to adult-run and child-centred models: "In the adult run model … learning is viewed as the product of teaching … adults see themselves as responsible for filling children up with knowledge, as if children are receptacles and knowledge is a product" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 211). The child-centred model, though still one-sided, "involves a more active role for children as learners. … children are seen as constructors of knowledge and adult involvement is seen as a potential impediment to learning" (ibid., p. 212).

These two models, she suggests, trap one or the other participant as powerful and active, because the other is powerless and passive. Her alternative model advocates a "community of learners" approach because

> in a community of learners, both mature members of the community and less mature members are conceived as active; no role has all the responsibility for knowing or directing, and no role is by definition passive. Children and adults together are active in structuring shared endeavours, with adults responsible for guiding the overall process and children learning to participate in the management of their own learning and involvement. (ibid., p. 213)

Rogoff's research identified several characteristics of communities of learners, as summarised below.

- Adults serve as leaders and facilitators for students and each other, not as authority figures.
- Emphasis is on the process of learning (rather than just finished products). Inherent interest in activities is fostered, along with learning responsibility for one's choices.
- Evaluation of student progress occurs through working with and observing the child.
- Co-operative learning occurs throughout the whole programme, with children working in collaboration with other children and adults throughout the day in ways that are intended to promote learning to learn and to support group processes, as well as to make use of others as resources (ibid., pp. 220–2).

One response to building a community of learners with assessment:

The contribution young children make to society is largely marginalised and hidden in centres and homes. The learning, let alone assessment, is largely unseen, sometimes even by the users of early childhood services. Rogoff (1994) suggests that schools (in our case, early childhood centres) are segregated from "the mature activities of the community" (p. 213). She fosters the idea that communities of learners outside the school help children to learn about the adult world as much as the concept of a community of learners helps them within the school. The problem of how to make visible the daily life in a centre prompted one kindergarten to document what happened for their families/whānau in what they call Term Books which form part of their documentation.

As part of a stated commitment to a responsive and emergent curriculum, the kaiako[2] at Otaki Kindergarten participate with the children in deciding "what next?". It seems to be a characteristic of everyday practice that children determine curriculum direction as much as the teachers do. How this is realised in practice is a subtle matter that relies fundamentally on knowing the children, but also on knowing the community. The teachers place a high value on the notions of community, in several ways. First, there is a strong commitment to family/whānau and to empowerment. Second, alongside these principles, practices are holistic and relationships are valued within and beyond the walls of the kindergarten. Third, the focus is shifted from the experience of the individual to the experience of the community—the community being made up of individuals.

The Fence

This Term Book entry is one of many that feature Mrs Hei Hei, the kindergarten's hen.[3]

The Fence

Mitchell came to Kindy "I'm going to make a fence." "Great, and we need one to keep Mrs Hei Hei out of our garden. The garden we are making for the sunflowers and calendulas we've grown from seed.

We had to find wood, pieces that were long enough. We found the rulers and measured and drew lines where the wood needed to be cut.

Keegan and Duncan did "chainsawing" with the sound effects. Mathew helped saw too –the wood he was cutting was very hard and he needed a few rests. It took a while, but he persevered and sawed right through. We got the front bit finished, carted it over to the garden to see if it was the right size – then added the side piece. Sarne could visualise where the next post needed to go. "To make a square". Keegan could see "we need another bit there so it can stay up." Oscar drew a plan "These are my measures –that's a wobbly side there." Delane managed to get the nails hit right on their heads and Rhyna sat one end of the board so Jayson-Lee could keep cutting. Carlos was keen to saw with Keegan. "It's okay, you can help me. You saw this bit here, and I'll saw here." That piece ended up a bit short, but, kei te pai, we used it somewhere else.

When it was finished we put it around the garden – it was a bit of a tight squeeze. "It's because those sides are too short," said Sarne.

When I suggested we paint it, Jayson agreed. "Mrs

Hei Hei –Don't go in" So he wrote a sign, including a drawing of her .. "with big floppy ears". We searched the Kindy to find her and check out her ears. "No ears, but that thing on top of her head". The drawing was completed, including the comb.

There was a bit of korero about the colour of the fence, and they decided it should be red. I found a can of red paint just before Whakapai time. 'It's okay. You can paint it when we've gone." So I did.

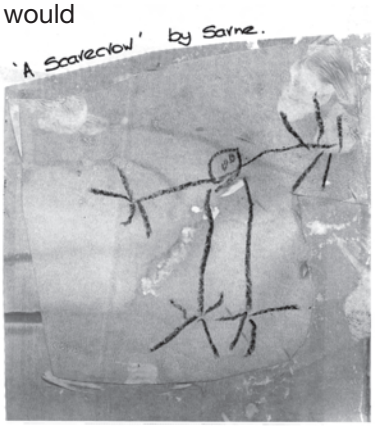
Two days – lots of conversations – lots of measuring and sawing and hammering . Lots of kids working together for a shared purpose .....

But – "Quick, Quick, there is a bird on the garden!"

More korero .. and I suggested we need a scarecrow – "There's one on Bob the Builder.... He can walk." Mitchell said that we could use a brown plastic bag for a head, but when we couldn't find one, said that a supermarket bag would do. We filled it with newspaper and were going to paint it. I thought it would be a good idea to cover it with paper maché to make it stronger before we painted it.

Jayson Lee found some wool to tie a stick onto it for arms – and we used the gumboot stand to hold it up while we were working on it.

Keegan thought that scarecrows would be good for scaring away cockroaches and that they should have wings so they can fly, and a big open mouth.



So far, its got sticks for arms and body and a head that needs attention ..

..... we don't know what will happen next ....

Many families keep hens in this semi-rural community, and so Mrs Hei Hei's free-ranging exploration is familiar. It is not without problems, however, as the preceding story illustrates.

Usually, fences in early childhood settings establish physical boundaries to keep children safe from the dangers in the outside world. In this case, the children built a fence to keep their plants safe from a free-ranging hen. Incarcerating Mrs Hei Hei was not an option. Establishing physical boundaries around the plants was.

Building a fence was a practical solution—it involved adults and children in design and construction. It also documented clear evidence that the power of print was understood even if the audience (Mrs Hei Hei) was herself an illiterate hen. The balance of power in this experience was shared as reification of the kaiako's living philosophy: to respect the mana of the child and whānau. Children and adults determine the curriculum in a way that closely resembles Rogoff's (1994) characteristics for a community of learners approach. Moreover, uncertainty is part of the process.

It is not easy to convey the richness of the Term Book story out of the context of the kindergarten and the community in which it is situated. To acknowledge the community requires participants to recognise the historical, social, and cultural influences in the early childhood setting and beyond. It is not easy, or necessarily desirable, to read the Term Books without acknowledging their purpose: to communicate to families/whānau some of what the children and the kaiako do during the day. Term Books on their own do not constitute a holistic assessment of community, and so the kaiako use a range of documentation to assess children's learning. But the Term Books do allow for revisiting the experience by community members—even Mrs Hei Hei.

Conclusion

The challenges of sociocultural assessment are complex, but exciting. The discussions and debates will, let us hope, broaden out the boundaries (fences) to empower practitioners to reconceptualise assessment practices and to focus not just on individual experiences, but also on the experiences of the group (community of learners) within the framework of the principles of *Te Whāriki* .

Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful to the teachers, parents, and children of Otaki Kindergarten for allowing me to use The Fence story. The relationships continue to grow in challenging and unexpected ways.

Notes

1 Term Books are a collection of photographs and narrative observations presented in a handmade book. They are a record of events of the term. These books are kept in a special box in the kindergarten so that parents, children, and visitors can read them.

2 "kaiako" is a Māori word commonly used to mean teacher, but the kaiako at Otaki Kindergarten use it because "ako" means both to learn and to teach.

3 "heihei" is the Māori word for hen.

References

Alcock, S. (2000). *Pedagogical documentation. Beyond observations.* Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

Broadfoot, P. (2000). Intuition and assessment. In T. Atkinson and G. Claxton (eds), *The intuitive practitioner: On the value of not always knowing what one is doing.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Cannella, G.S. (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education. Social justice and revolution.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Carr, M., Cowie, B., Gerrity, R., Jones, C., Lee, W., & Pohio, L. (2001). Democratic learning and teaching communities in early childhood: Can assessment play a role? Conference Proceedings. *Early childhood education for a democratic society.* Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Carr, M., May, H., Podmore, V. (1998). Learning and teaching stories. New approaches to assessment and evaluation in relation to Te Whāriki. *Symposium for 8th European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Settings, Spain.* Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University.

Gipps, C. (1999). Socio-cultural aspects of assessment. *Review of Research in Education, 25*, 355–92.

Goodfellow, Joy. (2001). Wise practice: The need to move beyond best practice in early childhood education. *Australian Early Childhood Association Journal, 26*(3) (September), 1–5.

Ministry of Education. (1993). *Te Whāriki. He Whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki. He Whāriki mātauranga mō nga mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early childhood curriculum.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education (1996). Revised statement of desirable objectives and practices (DOPS). *New Zealand Gazette, 139*(4), 3349-3350.

Ministry of Education. (1998). *Quality in action. Te Mahi Whai Hua. Implementing the revised statement of desirable objectives and practices in New Zealand early childhood services.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Podmore, V., May, H., & Carr, M., with Cubey, P., Hatherly, A., & Macartney, B. (2001). "*The child's questions". Programme evaluation with Te Whāriki using "teaching stories".* Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University.

Rogoff, B. (1994). Developing understanding of the idea of communities of learners. *Mind, Culture and Activity, 1*(4) (Fall), 212-232.

Te One, S. (2002). *Portfolios as an alternative assessment tool.* Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University.

Sarah Te One teaches at the Institute of Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

Email: sarah.TeOne@vuw.ac.nz