Emma Buchanan

Permanently Performing Learning Subjects: The assessment of 'learning dispositions' in early education

EMMA BUCHANAN

University of Melbourne; Victoria University, Wellington

Abstract

Questions of measurement permeate all sectors of education. The limiting effects of assessment regimes on curriculum content, student engagement and forms of success have been widely noted, including in relation to early childhood education. 'Developmental' observations and assessments of young children have been extensively criticised as limiting, normalising and pathologising. A turn toward context, participation and voice in early education has been posed as 'a way out' of this problematic. Aotearoa New Zealand's socioculturally framed narrative assessment approach exemplifies such a turn. 'Learning story' assessments work to foreground, and extend, children's 'learning dispositions'. Overwhelmingly, this assessment approach is characterised as empowering, and enabling the development of diverse, 'competent, confident' child learners. In this paper, I draw from a recently conducted Foucauldian analysis of early childhood education assessment discourse-practice in New Zealand. Approaching ethics as self constitutive practices, I consider possible ethical and governmental effects of this assessment and pedagogical approach. I argue that the 'telos' of this approach appears to be the production of permanently-performing learning subjects. Working with an understanding of ontology as technical, this 'troubling' analysis does not, however, involve a call for the removal of regulation, or futures-thinking as a source of direction for conduct in early education per se. By considering the normative conceptions, and technical inscriptions, that are at work in the learning stories approach, my argument troubles its status as empowering practice, and provokes instead, an analysis of issues of measurement and standardisation as they relate to practices of self government and constitution.

Introduction

Questions of assessment, measurement, and testing permeate all sectors of education, and they are interconnected with questions of curriculum and pedagogy. In the case of early childhood education (ECE), considerations about the knowledge, outcomes and effects of curriculum and assessment approaches often reflect wider debates within sociology and philosophy of education. A critical sociology of the curriculum, and critical theory more generally, has been particularly influential in framing the now extensive criticisms of child development knowledge as the dominant, foundational and naturalised basis for thinking and practice in ECE.

Kessler and Swadener, for instance, concluding the influential 1992 collection *Reconceptualising the early childhood curriculum: Beginning the dialogue,* argued that developmentally appropriate practice and its research base was founded in 'eurocentric, often middle-class, notions of optimal early childhood experiences' (1992, p. 291). They questioned the contribution that a developmentally appropriate curriculum was making to social justice, and urged early childhood scholars, researchers, and teachers to consider 'whose voices are being represented by what is taught and experienced, and whose interests are being served?' (p. 290). Towards the end of the 1990s, and also addressing themes of power and privilege, eminent early childhood reconceptualist Gaile Sloan Cannella (1999), elaborated these criticisms, contending that the child centred, free play, developmental curriculum and the practices of measuring developmental stages via child observation, objectified and subjugated children. Drawing on aspects of a poststructural engagement with 'the norm' and its exclusionary

effects, Cannella argued that continued adherence to the developmental curriculum resulted in the pathologisation of some children and their families. She suggested that it sanctioned interventions into the lives of both children who did not meet developmental milestones and families whose childrearing practices deviated from universal norms. Cannella called for a rethink of ECE as a practice for social justice and, as a central component of this aspiration, a more active vision and recognition of children and their capabilities.

In the wake of what is now a sustained and widespread problematisation of the developmental curriculum, and its attendant practices of observation and measurement (e.g., Burman, 1994; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Walkerdine, 1984), there has been a notable turn, in a range of jurisdictions, toward social and cultural contexts, participation and voice as guiding concepts in ECE thinking and practice (e.g., Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, 2009; Moss, Clark, & Kjørholt, 2005). *Te Whāriki,* the New Zealand early childhood education curriculum framework published in 1996 (Ministry of Education), and augmented by a narrative, learning disposition focused assessment framework in the early 2000s (Ministry of Education, 2004), instances such a turn. In its shift away from universalistic, developmental knowledge as the touchstone of curriculum and pedagogy, and in the emphasis on working with children as diverse, active, capable and competent learners, the curriculum and assessment approach has been widely characterised as an empowering pedagogy for diversity and social justice (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013).

In this paper, I draw on a broader Foucauldian analysis of contemporary early childhood education assessment in New Zealand (Buchanan, 2011). Key findings of the study suggest the need to interrogate the status of the approach, and the forms of diversity and social justice that it may support. The following discussion highlights some of the normative regulatory effects, at the level of child subjectivities and self constitution, that contemporary assessment may bring into play. Before discussing the study, I introduce salient features of *Te Whāriki* and its attendant dispositional assessment approach, noting also the tenor of the surrounding scholarly commentary.

Contemporary Early Childhood Curriculum and Assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand

Te Whāriki is underpinned by four key principles: *empowerment, holistic development, family and community,* and *relationships.* These are widely considered to capture the bicultural curriculum's fundamental educational values, pedagogical principles, and, as well, the sociocultural view that the contexts for, and outcomes of, learning and development are variable. Five indicative, rather than prescriptive, strands of learning and development outcomes are articulated: *wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication,* and *exploration. Te Whāriki*, which translates from te reo Māori (the Māori language) as 'a woven mat', reflects the understanding that the curriculum principles and strands will be locally interpreted in each ECE centre (Lee et al., 2013).

Curriculum is broadly defined in *Te Whāriki* as 'the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster learning and development' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). Assessment is also defined broadly, and considered at its fullest to encapsulate all of the spontaneous, moment to moment ways that adults *notice, recognise and respond* to children's learning. Assessment is therefore core to day to day curriculum enactment and documented assessments are considered to be the 'tip of the iceberg' of this wider, ongoing assessment (Ministry of Education, 2004).

The narrative approach to documented assessment, often termed *learning stories* (Carr, 2001), was developed to support the interpretive enactment of individualised curriculum, and the achievement of individualised learning outcomes and progress. Children's learning dispositions are the key learning outcomes of interest (Carr, 1998). They have been defined in a range of ways in relation to learning stories, including as: 'situated learning strategies plus motivation—participation repertoires from which a learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities' and, as 'being ready, willing and able to participate in various ways' (Carr, 2001, p. 21). Knowledge and skills continue to be important outcomes in this assessment scheme, but they are conceptualised as being bundled together in children's *working theories* and, importantly, understood to be ignited and strengthened in the context of children's developing learning dispositions, curiosities, and passions. Five core learning dispositions are identified in relation to the strands of

Te Whāriki: courage, trust, perseverance, confidence, and *responsibility*. As a basis for assessment, observable behaviours for each disposition have been broadly been described as follows*: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficultly, expressing ideas,* and *taking responsibility* (Carr, 1998).

Much of the influential New Zealand produced commentary about narrative assessment, and the *Te Whāriki* approach more broadly, draws implicitly on critical progressive sociological perspectives (Popkewitz, 1999) in the evaluation of these 'post developmental' approaches (e.g., Te One, 2003, Lee et al., 2013; see Blaiklock, 2008; Duhn, 2006, for notable exceptions). For example, commentary has highlighted how a widened, sociocultural conception of learning and development can value and foster diverse cultural capitals and funds of knowledge. This in turn, is seen to be supportive of wider aspirations of education for social justice and equity (Lee et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2008). Drawing particularly on what has been termed the 'new sociology of childhood' (James & Prout, 1990), and the centrality of conceptual binaries such as structure/agency, control/freedom (Prout, 2005), commentators also cite the empowerment of the child in the *Te Whāriki* curriculum and assessment approach (Smith, 2007). In such commentary, the child's *enabled* state is often contrasted with what is characterised as the passive and objectified state of the child on the development grid (Buchanan, 2011).

A Foucauldian Analysis of Early Childhood Assessment: Rationale, Approach and Key Concepts

In the context of the largely celebratory tone of the evaluations of the new, socioculturally informed, narrative assessment approaches, I took up a Foucauldian lens in order to gain an alternative critical perspective and understandings about ECE assessment in New Zealand. An initial provocation for the study was the discomfort and uneasiness with enacting curriculum through an *assessment conscious* lens, which I began to experience as an early childhood teacher in New Zealand in the late 2000s. As I will elaborate below, some of the difficulties seemed to derive from the reductive effects of understanding children and all of their actions in terms of *learning*. A Foucauldian analysis offered an alternative viewpoint, and prompted questions about power and knowledge, and their constitutive effects that were muted by the concern, informed by critical sociology, with representing diverse knowledge and with *releasing* the child.

The study adopted what is described by some, with trepidation, as a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis approach (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Graham, 2006; Willig, 2008). There were two types of documentary materials for the study. First was New Zealand produced scholarly (Carr, Jones & Lee, 2005; Hatherly & Sands, 2002; Hatherly & Richardson, 2007) and practitioner (Carr, Hatherly Lee & Ramsey, 2003; Turnock, 2009) commentary and research about narrative ECE assessment. Secondly, the research drew on a series of assessment examples drawn from scholarly and practitioner texts, and also the booklet *Children contributing to their own assessment*, which the Ministry of Education (2004, Book 4, p. 2) describes as particularly illustrating 'how a number of centres in Aotearoa New Zealand are now finding ways to include children's voices in assessment'. The booklet was part of a wider assessment exemplar series designed to assist early childhood centres to enact *Te Whāriki* informed assessments (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009). The publications were distributed nationally to all ECE services, and were part of a nation wide government funded professional development programme.

There were two phases of analysis. First, I analysed the construction of ECE assessment in New Zealand. I worked to identify the main knowledges and discourses that *made up* assessment, focusing particularly on noting various 'truth objects' (Graham, 2006, p. 7), such as the child and learning, which were being brought *into the true* by the discourse. Second, I worked to identify some of the key effects of assessment, paying particular attention to the establishment of the child as a subject of empowerment/liberation within the dispositional assessment regime. The concept of discourse was approached broadly, as systems that are made up of various forms of knowledge, practices, and truths. These systems are understood to have regulatory effects in terms of structuring (but not determining) the possibilities about what can be perceived, experienced, said and done (Fendler, 2010; Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003).

A number of other Foucauldian concepts were important in the analysis. An understanding of power, as 'an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future'(Foucault,

1982, p. 220), as productive, manifest in practice, and effective within domains of 'free action' was central to the study (Foucault, 1997c). An understanding of techniques of power—practices that 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends' (Foucault, 1997b, p. 225)—and techniques of the self—'the procedures…[that are] …suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 87)—were also important. In particular, the understanding that techniques of power and the self are in 'constant interaction' (Foucault, 1997b, p. 225) helped to minimise binartistic evaluations of assessment—does it objectify the child? Who has the power? Should this assessment form be endorsed? Instead, I approached assessment as a *technology of government*, made up of productive sets of practices and ideas, which at once presume and promote particular natures, forms of freedom, and ontologies of the child.

The idea of government as practical activities that direct, guide and shape the conduct of selves and others (Rose, 1999), and as activities that are often informed by circulating mentalities about what constitutes the good—the freedom, the happiness, the realisation, etc.,—of the subjects of government supported an attention to the productive truth effects of assessment (Foucault,1997a, 1997b). An understanding of ethics as self constitutive practices, and which are shaped in relation to compelling truths, ideas and practices for freedom (Fendler, 2010), also supported an attention to the productivity of assessment, particularly at the level of children's self-government and subjectivities—their experiences and knowledge of the self (Foucault, 1997a). Assessment then, was studied as a technology of government, encompassing material, spatial, embodied, and conceptual practices, the effects of which were broadly understood in terms of a structuring or 'governing' (but not determining) of 'the possible field of actions' (Foucault, 1982, p. 221).

Assessment Discourse: Key Truth Objects

An indication of the key truth objects that were constructed by assessment discourse is required before discussing some of the possible 'assessment effects' at the level of child subjectivities and self government. Overall, I found that assessment was constructed as a morally valorised practice, supportive of values and principles such as social justice, children's rights, diversity and plurality. The construction of learning and the child as 'new' truths within assessment discourse was central to the morally valorised status of the dispositional assessment form. Learning was constructed as a situated, socially and culturally mediated process of participation and developing competence in valued social practices. Accordingly, any given individually or culturally valued activity—or interaction and relationships with 'people, places and things' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)—was understood as presenting a *learning opportunity*. This understanding of learning was related to the construction of the child as a unique, contextually located, competent and agentic subject. A developmental identity for the child was largely muted in favour of the notion of the child as a competent, confident learner. Progress for the child's learning was constructed as an increase in the presentation, breadth and intensity of learning dispositions. Learning and development progress was therefore not measured or assessed against external indicators such as predefined knowledge, skills or developmental milestones, but was relative to each child's current dispositional profile.

'The learning opportunity' and 'The child's voice': Normalising Techniques of Government

The assessment examples that were studied documented children's varied engagements: dressing, moving around, watching clouds, talking about friends, making things, and so on. However, despite the extensive gestures toward the concepts of diversity and open-endedness in the assessment commentary, and despite the representation of varied and lively activities in the assessment examples, there was a terminal quality about the meanings that were made of these activities. The child as a learner, and learning progress as the strengthening of learning dispositions, saturated the meanings made of events and engagements. For example, a baby pulling himself along on the floor is described as having '*his own personal agenda*' and being '*self-motivated to be 'on the move'*'(Hatherly & Sands, 2002, p.9). A toddler struggling to take off her jumper, and who states 'no' in response to an offer of help, is described as demonstrating an '*emerging ability to be responsible for her own well-being*' (Hatherly & Sands, 2002, p.12). A child's screen-printing forays, over several days, are interpreted not, for instance, as an engaging, aesthetic experience, but as evidence of the child's emerging persistence and problem-solving (Ministry of Education, 2004, Booklet 4).

The dominant construction of learning as the strengthening of learning dispositions, coupled with the extended space of the learning opportunity, creates, the narratives suggest, a somewhat boundless domain of normatively regulated understanding and action. *People, places and things* seem to be understood primarily as constituent elements in the learning opportunity and experience. Children's affects, intentions, and actions also seem to be primarily apprehended according to what I term *the learning scheme*. The concept of voice helps to elaborate this point. *The child's voice* is a central, emotive, and quite nebulous, motif in the assessment commentary. It was not explicitly defined within the any of the source documents that were studied. It seems to stand for the voice literally—what a child says—but also, more broadly, to signify a child's contribution or their perspective about what matters to them. One scholarly text, for instance, noted that the child's perspective or voice may be communicated by 'gestures, sounds and facial expressions' (Carr et al., 2005, p. 145). In a discussion about New Zealand ECE assessment and curriculum, eminent New Zealand early childhood scholar, Anne Smith (2007) defines voice as 'that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own' (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004, p. 8, cited in Smith, 2007, p. 4), adding that 'agency is how children express their voice' (Smith, 2007, p. 4) Taken together, these scholarly commentaries indicate an understanding of voice as perspective, intention, expression, and action.

A striking feature of the assessment examples that were studied was the frequent interpretation of the child's voice—children's affects, such as smiling or chuckling, their movements in space, and the expression of desires and intentions—as expressing a learning nature: learning intentions and desires for learning progress. The case of Louie exemplifies the attribution of action and affect to learning intent and desire. *Louie going out the door* (Ministry of Education, 2004, Booklet 4, p.10) is a narrative about a baby who does not yet crawl but who moves himself through toys and other obstacles in order to get outside. The assessment is written with an emphasis on dispositional learning and notions of progress in learning as being to do with strengthening one's learning desire (Fendler, 1998) and engagement. Thus, in a short term review of the learning narrative, a teacher describes the event as an instance of '*great determination… [where] … he knew what he wanted and went for it, moving whatever got in his way!*' Louie is also described as setting and '*carrying out his self-set goal: getting outside onto the veranda and pulling himself up in the trellis*', and it is noted that '*for Louie, access to the outdoors was an important opportunity for his learning*'. Furthermore, it is suggested in the Ministry of Education written commentary to the assessment that the teacher's comment that Louie '*smiled with great delight about being outside*' indicates that the narrator recognises the way in which Louis communicates that he has achieved his self-set goal. This assessment is also described as providing '*baseline data for documenting development and change in how Louie sets himself goals and indicates that he has assessed his own achievemen*t' (Ministry of Education, 2004, Booklet 4, p.10).

This assessment, as well as those alluded to earlier, suggest that concepts/practices such as *learning opportunities, learning experiences,* and *the child's voice* function as normative moral injunctions, and inscriptive devices. They bring into play and are possible within a specific discursive and moral economy. Positioned as learning-subjects in unbounded spaces of learning opportunities (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006), children are encouraged to mobilise their affects and passions according to a perception of events as learning opportunities, and to conduct themselves *as learne*rs—where learning is a performance of behaviours related to the intensification of learning dispositions, or as one of the assessment texts studied suggested, 'a cumulative sequence of ever-increasing engagement to learning' (Turnock, 2009, p. 5). The extensiveness of the learning-opportunity space and the 'truth' of the child-as-learner produces a paradoxically reductive logic in narratives such as *Louie goes out the door*. For example, Louies' actions and desires were interpreted and made accountable within the logic of the learning scheme. A myriad of possible motives for his actions – a desire to be in the outside, or to be with others, and so on – are subsumed within the overarching interpretive scheme of action/intent/desire-as-learning.

The inscriptive, normative, and also performative qualities of the dispositional assessment approach are particularly suggested by assessments that involve discussion and interaction between adults and children. In the narratives I studied there were numerous examples where children were being positioned, and taking up understandings of themselves as learners, as was dominantly constructed in assessment discourse practice. In calls and comments by children such *as 'write about my moves!'*(Carr et al., 2005, p. 144) and '*I need some*

more photographs of me, don't I?' (Carr et al., 2005, p. 146) there is a suggestion that children are understanding their actions as learning performance: something that should command an audience and be documented for future consideration. In these and other examples there is a sense of children developing self-knowledge and repertoires of action that accord with an overall principle of 'permanent self-performance' (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006, p. 459).

Conclusion

In this discussion, I have focused on highlighting some of the normative dimensions of government that current assessment may bring into play. Important complexities and nuances in the findings of the study are inevitability muted in this brief discussion, and there are limits to this discursive analysis. In identifying what appear to be normative governmental practices, and related implications for child subjectivities, I do not, for example, presume to make definitive claims about the productions of specific child subjectivities and attendant forms of work on the self; the analysis is inevitably, to some extent, speculative. Nevertheless, the centrality in this assessment approach of bringing children, families, and wider communities into an 'assessment consciousness', underscores the need to consider the effects of these narrative, disposition focused forms of assessment.

I do not discount the injustices, forms of educational exclusion, and social inequities that the inclusion and valuing of diverse social practices the curriculum and assessment form seeks to address. However, there are important questions to ask about the effects of the forms of, for instance, inclusion and diversity that current assessment practices promote. This study suggests that there are new normativities at work in New Zealand's disposition focused assessment and curriculum model. Despite the notable inclusion of a wide range of valued activities, there is, as I have suggested, a terminal and reductive quality in this assessment form. There is also, I think, a profound instrumentalism at work. The vision of *the good* of the child subjects of ECE that animates assessment practices seems to be informed by, borrowing from Hultqvist (2004), a superpragmatic form of reasoning about government, where 'anything might be related to anything as long as it increases resources and wealth' (p. 173). In the learning disposition oriented assessment scheme, worlds of people, places, things, affects, intentions, bodies, and actions are it seems brought into visibility and account within a domain of government informed by the primacy of values such as those of opportunity and accrual. It seems that children are being called into instrumental relations with people places and things, and to orient themselves to these elements as *props* and *resources* in the process of accumulating and performing learning intensity, desire and capability.

My analysis should not be read as indicating a call for the removal of the regulation of selves or others in education *per se,* nor should it be seen as an argument for the removal of aspirations and ideals for the outcomes of actions and work on the self. The suggestion that disposition focused assessment is related to both the presumption and promotion of an ontology of the learning-desiring-performing subject is not interpreted as an instance of an *alien invasion* of the child (Foucault, 1986, cited in Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996). Rather, what working with an understating of ontology as technical does suggest is that assessment practice and its concomitant desired outcomes are promoting self constitutive and regulatory practices with reference to normative ideals. Accordingly, what I am arguing for is the need to consider what truths about the child and about learning are operating now; what these truths and attendant practices may presume and perhaps naturalise; and what imperatives for work on the self and others may be being brought into play in this assessment and learning scheme.

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