

Narrative assessment and practicing for equity in early years education.

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Abstract

In whose interests does narrative assessment work? Can narrative assessment be viewed as the kind of assessment that leads to equity? How and for whom? This paper critically examines the shifts in assessment practice in New Zealand early years education, framing it as a move towards equity and questioning the place of narrative in this.

Introduction

In this paper we propose a critical reading of formative assessment practice in early years education. Specifically we consider narrative assessment and the particular ways in which narrative has been taken up in the context of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. We claim that formative assessment practices achieved through narrative approaches can support teaching for equity. Further, that narrative holds promise for de-centering the early years teacher and for distributing responsibility for learning in early years settings. Whilst not devoid of challenges, narrative assessment that is formative can in our experience, empower learners and transform teaching towards working with rather than for children and families in the communities we share.

Our positions on narrative assessment have formed variously through experiences as teachers, colleagues and scholars in an early childhood education context where in recent years we have been working towards formative assessment practices. We are presently interested in the question, does and if so how does narrative assessment contribute to equity in early years education settings? Lia has worked in national roles with the assessment for learning resource *Kei tua o te pae, Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004/2009, hereafter referred to as *Kei tua o te pae*) and Alex's teaching in the early childhood and university settings has allowed her to use as well as to theorise formative assessment in a variety of ways. We both have a commitment to social justice and equity and view early childhood education as a context in which equity can be sought. However, it seems that the conceptual shifts required to affect a shift away from summative and discontinuous assessment practices towards continuous and formative assessment are difficult for teachers to come by. For us, narrative is key in the process. Change in

New Zealand early childhood education is certainly happening as recent evidence shows (Mitchell, 2008; Ministry of Education 2004/2009; Stuart, Aitken, Gould & Meade, 2008), we want to support the take up of formative assessment by dialoguing about narrative assessment and recognizing its potential for teaching, learning and community.

Our formative assessment context

Formative assessment also referred to as assessment for learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Broadfoot, 2007; Gipps, 1994) has been promoted in New Zealand as the preferred approach to assessment for the last 15-or-so years (Ministry of Education, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). The emphasis has been on documenting and planning for *valued learning* in community contexts with the communities themselves having a say in what constitutes the valued learning (Carr, 1998a, 1998b; Ministry of Education, 2004/2009). Achieved in response to curriculum development and the implementation of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996b), this shift to implementing assessment for learning has emerged through novel practices that have used the curriculum, dispositions and valued cultural capital as reference points for comprehending, documenting and planning for learning. The aim of practices is not only to define and attain specific learning goals or outcomes for individual children and groups, but to provide a context that provokes valued learning for all members of the early childhood community in whichever ways the community and its learning is defined. An aspiration statement from the curriculum provides a broad framework for practice, for children to “grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Ministry of Education, 1996b, p.9), and the consequences of assessment practices are clearly articulated as: community, continuity and competence (Carr and Cowie, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2004/2009). It is not as if anything goes, but for chartered early childhood services there is both broad framework and local scope for meaningful responses to the question of what can and should constitute valued learning and valid curriculum and assessment in the early years.

Taking an ipsative approach to assessing children's learning, effective formative assessment practices in early childhood education rely on children, their families and teachers all having understandings of what children can do, of what they wish to do, and of possible options for getting there. The perspectives of all stakeholders to the learning, that is, children, their families, peers, and teachers are required if agreement is to be reached on what counts as a credible and valid account of learning. High quality documented assessments evidence these processes in action. Where documented assessments are used by children and others to provoke discussions about previous, current and future learning goals they both reify and constitute formative assessment practice. Narrative has been central to the take up of these formative assessment practices in New Zealand Aotearoa early childhood education.

Narrative assessment and formative assessment in Aotearoa NZ

While well received, *Te whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996b) was a challenging document at its launch, particularly with regard to assessment. Practicing in ways that are true to the curriculum principles of empowerment, holistic learning, learning in partnership with parents, whānau and community, and relationships is difficult (Podmore & Carr, 1999). This is particularly so when former practices in New Zealand had privileged developmental outcomes, summative practices, the acquisition of knowledge, and school readiness (Carr, 2001; Hatherly & Richardson, 2007, Wilks 1993). The curriculum, which foregrounded socio-cultural perspectives on teaching and learning emphasized the centrality of reciprocal and responsible relationships for learning (Carr, 2001). It was clear that assessment practices would need to change significantly if they were to match such thinking.

Several research projects on assessment and early childhood education have since been undertaken and in the last 15 years a range of assessment practices that are more aligned with the curriculum have developed (Carr, 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004/2009; 2009). Of significance to our discussion, the *Project for Assessing Children's Experiences* (Carr, 1998a; 1998b, also known as *PACE*) developed and trialled an approach to assessment that used narrative in the form of "learning stories" (Carr, 1998a, p.22). The approach recognised Bruner's (1991) view that narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child, he says, "we organise our experience and memory of

human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (p.4). For young children the narrative became an accessible and recognisable mode of exchange through which learning could be discussed and planned for. Following *PACE* (Carr, 1998a; 1998b) and parallel to a development in the compulsory school sector, a project on early childhood learning and assessment exemplars developed, *Kei Tua O Te Pae* (Ministry of Education 2004/2009). This resource provided guidance on practices of formative assessment for Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood settings. The exemplars show the use of narrative in assessment in a range of forms and they demonstrate the powerful influence of formative assessment on children’s identity formation, on community building, and on the complexity of learning, teaching and assessing within a socio-cultural frame.

Both a Government funded evaluation of assessment practices (Stuart, Aitken, Gould & Meade, 2008) and a national report by the Education Review Office (ERO, 2007)) show that socio-cultural assessment practices have been strengthened. Stuart et.al. (2008) concluded that early childhood services have made significant steps towards building communities of learning; that assessment is made visible in practice; and that educators have made steps towards linking assessment and planning. However, while child engagement in assessment practices was evidenced in interviews with researchers, documented assessments rarely recorded such child engagement and its outcomes. Portfolios of documented assessments in the Stuart et.al (2008) evaluation did not regularly show continuity of learning or the engagement of the children and parents in formalized assessment processes. These findings confirmed the ERO national report on assessment in early childhood services (ERO, 2007). That report suggested educators needed more time to fully understand and implement formative assessment processes and practices. While early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand largely reject standardised and summative developmental assessment nowadays, the take up of formative assessment practices still proves difficult. We think that by dialoguing about the place of formative and narrative assessment in supporting equity and social justice in early childhood education that we provide further justification for assisting the shift towards change.

Questions of equity in assessment

In the context of this paper we constitute equity and equitable assessment practices in two ways. First, as the kind of practice that is perceived as fair by those party to it; and second, as the kind of practice that seeks to make visible the ways in which matters of justice and equity are relevant to children's lives. By being fair, we mean, that everyone operating within the scope of the early childhood centre with a vested interest in documenting and planning for learning takes responsibility for and has capacity to contribute to discussions and decision making about their own learning and the learning of others. Everyone's views count, and it is this *distributed responsibility for learning* that we wish to show through the narratives we will discuss in this paper. In seeking to make visible the ways justice and equity are relevant to children's lives, we see narratives as able to promote a framework for learning (and by implication teaching and assessment) that addresses the aspiration statement from *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996b). The approach shows how children make genuine contributions to community life and wellbeing through active participation in various *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998).

Carr, Cowie, Gerrity, Jones, Lee & Pohio (2001) have long held that assessment practices can contribute to the building of "democratic communities of learning and teaching" (p.29). We see this in the New Zealand context, in part through the expectation that formative assessment practices, as stated earlier, should encompass community aspirations for teaching and learning (Carr, 1998a, 1998b; Ministry of Education, 2004/2009). Further, given the constructivist, ecological and socio cultural underpinnings of the curriculum, *participation*, a tenet of democracy has become a central theme of policy and practice for Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood teaching, learning and assessment. For assessment practice, a culture of children, families, children's peers and teachers' participating together in assessment activity is developing – it seems as if we are beginning to acknowledge both the partiality of the teacher's view and the limits of his/her singular expertise. No longer the purview of the teacher alone, responsibility for recognising, interpreting and planning for learning in early childhood education has become both communal and community activity.

The narrative in this process has been called "conscription device" (Cowie & Carr, 2009, p.106) for the way this kind of documented assessment works to recruit

participants of the early childhood community to discussions of learning, planning, teaching and assessment. The narratives, as Hatherly (2006) notes, “span the boundaries of the various communities of practice” (p.28) in which children operate, and in doing so de-centre the centre (and the teacher) as we (as teachers) are compelled to recognise how children’s changing participation in the world makes an impact on those both inside and outside the centre setting. This circulation of power between the professional educator and the children and families with whom s/he works provides scope for building critical communities for equity.

Distributed responsibility for learning

In explaining the metaphor for assessment ‘beyond the self, beyond the horizon’ within *Kei Tua O Te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004/9), Carr (2009) discusses the influences of contemporary learning theorists’ work on pedagogy and assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand. As previously explained, the take up of socio-cultural learning theory in the 1990s necessitated the development of concomitant assessment practices. If learning (and development) was to be understood as cultural and education viewed as occurring in community, it followed that valid tools for interpreting and planning for learning would share similar characteristics; at the basic level it meant that teachers would recognise that not only they/we could be ‘expert’ in learning, we would share or take a distributed view of learning (and therefore assessment and teaching).

At the same time, our understandings of early childhood education settings as learning communities or communities of practice (Cowie & Carr, 2009) in which children’s identities of learners become shaped by social activity and recognition of competence began to develop. Frequent participation in shared activities in which children are able to take responsibility for setting and attaining learning goals became an aim of early childhood practices and teachers were asked to recognise the role they and all participants of the learning community had in “reifying the learning of value” (Claxton & Carr, 2004, p96). The active participation of children, their peers and families in assessment practices was warranted. Viewing learning as responsive and reciprocal inferred that teachers and others would take responsibility for learning, and therefore would work with distributed responsibility for documenting learning. The

following examples of assessment practice go some way to exemplifying how some early childhood practitioners are working towards these aims.

Examples of equitable practice via narrative assessment that is formative.

This first series of documented assessments snapshots Max’s learning about his rights to contribute to the significant communities of practice of which he is part. His considerable competence in some areas of home life, spill over into the early childhood centre and what is captured is an example of how responsibility for learning, and in this case, for documenting learning can occur through narrative assessment that is formative.

Figure 1. represents the documented assessments of Max’s learning.

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The first assessment is written by Max’s teacher Lauren, in January 2009, it is an account of Max offering to help with the outside clean up after a hose left a puddle in the sandpit. Lauren writes *about* Max noting the value of his spontaneous play, his ability to make decisions, and to set his own problems. The plan for his future learning is about Max’s ongoing decision making and for his capacity to help out in the programme in the future. The next month Lauren uses the assessment practice to ask Max’s family about how he helps out at home. A rich narrative from Max’s family is returned to the centre, it accounts for a range of ways Max contributes.

In July 2009 Max’s teacher Catherine documents an activity where Max, along with several others plan a building project and direct their own play through a morning. At the end of the narrative the teacher wonders, “[do] these children like to... plan and set tasks to complete [at home]”? Later Max’s parents email a photo to the centre, it is of Max holding a tram ticket for a ride on the city’s tram, a sticker attached to the photo reads, “Let’s go for a ride on the tram today!” said Max. “Great idea!” said Mum.

In September, Max’s teacher Rebecca writes a narrative about Max asking to help settle other children at the centre to sleep. She reflects on the fact that Max has learned a lot about the routine aspects of the centre and that he feels able to participate

in ways that help out with these. The planning focuses on continuing to support Max's participation in centre life and Rebecca suggests she discusses with Max about how he views his role at the centre. She spans the boundaries to home and asks Max's parents once more about how he helps out there.

The next narrative, written from home, positions Max as competent and responsible, especially now that he's turned 3.5 yrs and has a baby brother to help take care of. His parents account for all the ways he contributes at home, and at his grandparents' houses, they thank Max in the text of the narrative, *addressing him* as the primary audience of the documented assessment.

In March 2010 Rebecca's next assessment of Max accounts for a significant initiative he helped to establish at the centre: recycling. After being away with chicken pox, Max emailed his teacher telling her about his interests in organics and recycling; Max suggested that he, his friends and teachers go to the recycling station with some rubbish so they could really understand about the processes involved. It happened. The learning noted by the teacher focussed on how willing Max was to share his knowledge with others, the planning comment included the following statement, "I look forward to your leadership of this and supporting you to achieve your learning goals". The final documented assessment in the series records the trip to the eco-depot, the narrative ends with the teachers' open ended comment, "Max, we look forward to observing where your leadership and organisational skill are demonstrated next".

The teachers and parents are sharing responsibility for documenting learning. Not always centering Max as the primary benefactor of the documented assessment the adults in the community have at least brought to light Max's capacity to lead learning in the centre and for himself. The overt questioning of aspects of Max's participation by the teachers, and the sharing of their thinking gives possibilities for ongoing discussions about Max's learning. Through the narrative assessments we glimpse the communities of which Max is part transform as well as Max's participation transforming too as he becomes competent and recognised as competent by those around him. Not only can-and-does he have a say in what goes in the world, Max is

operating as a fully participating member of these significant communities of practice and the documented assessments are exemplifying this process.

The second set of data we are presenting in this paper concerns how narrative can show the relevance of social justice and equity to children's lives. This time it's Connor whose learning is foregrounded. The three narratives show continuity in Connor's disposition towards fairness and equity and demonstrate how a framework for teaching such as social justice, can be used to guide the recognition of valued learning.

Connor's first story expresses his view that things should be fair for boys and girls. Protesting at the lack of reference to girls in a song being sung at the centre Connor takes action to change the lyrics, asserting, "girls can be in songs too, not just boys". Several months later Beverly notes a continued capacity to assert equity for boys and girls and she documents this in a second narrative. This time Connor resisted an assertion by an older boy that boys couldn't and shouldn't wear nail polish. Having already had his own nails painted and therefore demonstrably taking a position in opposition to his peer who laughed and stated "boys don't do painted nails, only girls", Connor responded in a matter of fact way saying "I can if I want to" and therefore provided an alternative view and as his teacher notes, scope for other boys in the vicinity to take part in the nail painting activity too. Connor's teacher Beverly notes his resilience and determination and asks his parents if these qualities show at home.

In the final narrative Beverly follows up on the proposed planning from the previous narratives and reads Connor and another child two alternate stories of the three little pigs, the traditional version and a version from the wolf's perspective. An excerpt from the narrative is included below:

We read our usual book about the three little pigs and then I got out the new book called *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*. "It is the same story, but told by the wolf"
As we read and got to the part where the wolf accidentally sneezed, blowing down the first little pig's house, you asked, "Does the wolf have a house?" "I think so, but let's go back in the story and see". We found the page and saw that yes the wolf did live in a house. "What is it made of" you asked. "Well I am not too sure but I think it looks like it might be bricks."
"That's good" you said.
We kept reading the story and Lilly thought that it was okay that the wolf ate the pigs because they were food. You agreed.
When we finished the story, I asked you what you thought was important about this story.

You sat there for a bit and said, “Everyone should build proper houses”.(excerpt from ‘The true story of the three little pigs’, Beverley, October 2010)

When Connor quietly reflects on the fact that “everybody should build proper houses”, he shows us how even very young children can reflect critically on important world events. Having recently lived through a magnitude 7.1 earthquake and the with aftershocks still day/nightly rocking his world and the worlds of those around him, Connor’s concern for the safety of housing available to him and “everyone” reminded his teacher of Connor’s tendency to respond to the world with compassion and empathy. His unexpected (from the perspective of Beverly) response reminded his teacher, and others via the documenting of the narrative in this way, that children’s views on the world can and do matter. This very real problem of a lack of adequate housing in Connor’s community at large was brought to light through the fictional story of the ‘true story of the three little pigs’ and showed how matters of justice and equity impact children’s lives.

Connor’s narratives support communities of learning, in that even those not present can ‘listen’ to Connor and learn from his perspectives. All three narratives were written by Beverly; she took the first to a staff meeting for discussion and suggested to others that they keep an eye out for learning situations in the centre that foregrounded social justice. No one took her up on this until after she had presented the third narrative and another teacher, with the advantage of the to assist, commented that she now understood and was interested in further discussion. The ultimate impact of Connor’s disposition towards social justice and equity is yet to be seen – the learning that is documented is relatively recent and potential pathways for future learning in process, but the possibility of ongoing engagement with social justice and equity in the context of this particular learning community is definitely there. The narratives have been re-presented to Connor; he acknowledges that the events took place but at this point, has made no further comment.

Discussion

We began this paper with the question of does and if so how does narrative assessment contribute to equity in early years settings? We hope that the examples we’ve discussed have begun to respond to this question. It is clear to us that equity

constituted as fairness and as concern for social justice can be addressed through narrative assessment practices. If we are trying to create communities of practice in which all members have a say about learning in/for the community and if social justice and equity are desired, then narrative assessment that is formative holds much promise for making this valued learning visible.

The very nature of the narrative, as accessible and familiar to children, their peers, families and teachers assumes participation that is not formally precluded by anything other than the *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996b) aspiration statement. If we are truly invested in providing early childhood education settings in which children learn that they can and do “make a valued contribution to society” (p.9) then our practices cannot be wedded to narrow outcomes and predetermined aims, nor can they utilise processes of enculturation that absorb children into the existing world. Justice and equity as foci of teaching and assessment practices are mandated, it is, as Biesta (2008) would argue, education as a “radically open question” (p.ix).

We think that practising narrative assessment that is formative requires an ethic for teaching that privileges participation as *acting in and belonging to community*. Through such an approach, concern for social justice and equity will likely prevail (Gunn, Child, Madden, Purdue, Surtees, Thurlow & Todd, 2004). We must remember though that acting in community in the context of an education setting is bounded by norms, expectations and understandings that precede us. In formal education settings we are cast to existing webs of relations that construct teachers, children and parents in particular ways. As Foucault (1987) reminds us, it is impossible to attain neutral and value free relationships and practices, especially where a limited number of available subject positions for us to occupy exists. Before we ever embody these positions expectations exist of how we will *be* teacher, parent, child, in the formal teaching, learning and assessment context. As teachers we must resist the urge to use narrative as a new means of surveillance and governance of the child; our current impulse to heed children’s perspectives on their learning requires new concepts for teaching, learning and assessment that distributes power for learning more equitably and allows flexibility for self, peer, whānau and teacher led assessment practices to flourish.

In conclusion, the power of continuity in narrative assessment that is formative helps to re-narrate valued learning over time and can reveal how matters of equity and social justice transform learning communities and their members. By documenting as Carr (2009) writes, “the increasing connections ‘beyond the walls’ of the early childhood setting” (p.37) we achieve what we call a ‘decentering of the centre/teacher’ to reveal learning community in action. Narrative assessment that is formative provides much promise in our view for empowering learners and transforming teaching towards working with rather than for the children and families in the communities we share.

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