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Pedagogical Documentation and Early Childhood Assessment Through Sociocultural Lens

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Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of early childhood teaching. When considered through the lens of sociocultural theory, the emphasis of assessing young children's learning and development prioritizes the child as social actor – the child as a meaning-maker – drawing on experiences that reflect their own context. Thus, when considered socioculturally, assessment of young children places less importance on development norms – that is, consideration of universalized milestones and goals – and more emphasis on goals that reflect local social and cultural aspirations.

Sociocultural assessment reflects the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky whose developmental theories include how humans learn through interactions with more experienced others. Vygotsky described this as a zone of proximal development (ZPD), in which the child

becomes more capable than what is possible when the child is on their own. When used in a teaching/learning situation, ZPD encourages an early childhood teacher to engage with a child's activity in a way that enables the child to achieve their goal, but without taking over control from the child. Jerome Bruner gave this pedagogical process the name of "scaffolding" which emphasizes a sturdy but temporary support. Working with ZPD thus requires assessment of children's competence at various levels (alone, and with support) and judgment of support needs. Although some early childhood education (ECE) assessment is influenced by developmental Piagetian influence, central to a sociocultural perspective in ECE is the belief that children construct knowledge in a social context and that children are active protagonists in their own learning rather than the passive recipients of educator transmission. Yet Barbara Rogoff's work also emphasizes the importance of children as observers, as well as participants, in culturally valued activity – whether at home, in an ECE setting, or in their wider communities.

Applying these ideas to assessment requires educators to recognize that children's learning and development occurs within a social and cultural context, where meaning is co-constructed with others, and that to consider the possibilities for children requires us to include multiple perspectives of the child. Sociocultural theorists such as Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, and Rogoff assert that learning cannot be understood without

reference to context and culture. Further, sociocultural theory promotes recognition of the whole child: intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual domains. Thus, assessment in early childhood requires methods that use a holistic perspective of learning and development. A sociocultural view of assessment includes practices that are not standardized or which seek to "test" children.

Pedagogical Documentation

While the impact of sociocultural theory is evident in how many countries approach curriculum design and the pedagogical strategies that educators use in their teaching practices, how to apply these ideas to pedagogical documentation and assessment is less well understood. Within early childhood education, educators have acted as diligent observers of children and have placed much value on the documentation they produce. Early childhood educators assess learning and development using documentation strategies such as running records, anecdotal records, and portfolios, as well as artifacts, such as videos, photographs, and drawings. The documentation generated from these types of qualitative observations and the accompanying annotations provide visibility and evidence of both individual and group learning and development. These have become a pivotal assessment tool in early learning environments.

Widely used in the Reggio Emilia educational project in northern Italy, "pedagogical documentation" makes a shift away from developmentally focused documentation. Instead, the Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes a more nuanced approach that places both process and product by children and educators as integral in creating opportunities to reflect multiple perspectives of children, educators, environment, and context.

Pedagogical documentation is the search for meaning. Moss (2019) describes it as "A process of making processes (such as learning) and practices (such as project work) visible and therefore subject to reflection, dialogue, interpretation and critique" (p. 85).

When used for assessment purposes, this type of pedagogical documentation is unapologetically iterative, subjective, and value laden. When considered socioculturally, assessment cannot take age alone as a reliable indicator of what is valued, important, or desirable. Standardized forms of assessment, such as checklists, rely on attempts at creating universalized "objective" developmental attributes and goals. These do not provide authentic results that speak to culture, context, or environment and do not sufficiently take account of diversity (Moss 2019).

Different types of documentation (e.g., videos, transcripts, photographs, observations) become the basis for attempting to interpret the meaning that children attribute to their work and the work of educators. There is an inextricable link between this type of documentation and assessment.

Assessment, Curriculum, and Educators

Assessment can be *of*, *for*, or *as* learning. Assessment *of* learning is when educators gather evidence about children's learning and compare data against learning goals. Assessment *for* learning is when educators, parents, or children use knowledge and understanding about children's thinking to further plan the curriculum. Assessment *as* learning is when children reflect on their own learning and use this to forward plan what they will do next.

Educators use all three approaches to assessment (*of*, *for*, or *as* learning) to gain a full picture of children's learning that helps parents understand how children are progressing, helps children to support their own learning, and helps educators to forward plan curriculum (McLachan et al. 2013).

Assessment *of* learning is evident when documentation of learning is analyzed in terms of meeting (or not meeting) expectations. This is known as "summative" assessment. Assessment is often presented as key to cyclical model of planning which includes elements such as observing, planning, implementing, documenting, evaluating, and revisiting. This is how assessment *for* learning can occur. In countries such as Australia,

South Africa, and New Zealand, this is evident in their curriculum documents for early childhood education. In other countries, such as in Sweden, assessment is less explicitly visible in the early childhood curriculum, but nevertheless an implicit and important part of ECE.

Within sociocultural approaches to assessment, there is significant scope for a child to be agentic, especially when pedagogical documentation is made available to a child. In such a situation, a child can revisit a past event and can be encouraged to share how it was understood at the time (perhaps different to how it was recorded), as well as how a child might understand the event now ("But I got bigger, didn't I?"). This is an example of "assessment *as* learning."

Regardless of how assessment is presented in curriculum policy documents, assessment is a key professional responsibility of early childhood educators. When considered socioculturally, included in this responsibility is the documenting of interactions of the educator. As Fleer (2002) suggests, assessment practices should focus not only on children and their interactions within the learning environment. They should also include "detailed observations" of educators' interaction. Fleer maintains that "the documentation of what teachers do, say and think alongside children's interactions is critical for determining how participation changes over time" (p. 112).

In this way, an EC educator is not just a supplier of interpretation but also a participant in, and a beneficiary of, the process. Sociocultural assessment in early childhood is an activity of reciprocity. The educator's voice, values, and perspectives all shape sociocultural assessment.

"Tools" for Sociocultural Assessment

There are many tools of assessment used in early childhood education, but they usually start with the educator taking an interest in what a child (or children) are doing and communicating. Some assessments are clearly sociocultural in nature (anecdotal snippets, extended narratives, and learning stories). Other tools (such as videos, time samples, event recordings, environmental

tracking, and sociograms) may or may not be considered sociocultural depending on the purpose of the documentation, as well as how it is analyzed, presented, and shared/discussed/collaborated on. For all of these approaches, the pedagogical annotation and analysis are critical, not merely the completion of the activity, and the assessment activity should be systematic (Podmore 2006).

Anecdotal Snippet (or Anecdotal Note)

An anecdotal snippet is a brief observation which is jotted down. Such snippets might capture a "first time" or other significant event or short examples of language. Educators may collect many snippets in any given day, and several snippets gathered together may inform a learning story or narrative.

Narratives

A narrative documents observations with sufficient detail to enable a story to be told. A narrative could, for example, be a 20-min experience; the gathering together of anecdotal notes that illustrate a child's engagement or interests (e.g., illustrations of a toddler's schema in action across hours, days, or even weeks). A narrative could involve recording children's conversations. An extended narrative observation can give an educator greater insight into play, language, dispositions, schema, and areas of competence.

Learning Stories

Following the introduction of *Te Whāriki*, New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum in 1996, one of its authors, Margaret Carr, began to work on creating "learning stories" – a sociocultural approach to narrative assessment which is aligned with the new curriculum's approach to learning and development. Carr's seminal publication focused on learning dispositions, such as curiosity and perseverance, as inherent aspects of learning stories. However, the learning story formats have evolved and now take multiple forms with curriculum goals often providing other points of analysis for educators. As ways of linking context and culture, narratives and learning stories provide a sociocultural lens

through which to approach assessment (Carr and Lee 2013). These approaches place a value on co-construction of knowledge and reflect a context in which children's interests and daily lives are represented, as well as the ideas, strategies, and approaches of educators.

Time Sample

In a time sample observation, a child is observed regularly, for a set period, for example, for 30 seconds every 5 minutes, for an hour, or for a minute every 30 minutes for 3 hours. This kind of observation can illuminate a child's interest, for example, in construction. Time samples are useful where educators are uncertain of a child's interest.

Environmental Tracking

Environmental tracking utilizes a floor plan of an early childhood service and tracks where and how long a child is playing in a specific location. For example, environmental tracking might indicate that a child who was previously assumed to be flitting from activity to activity is demonstrating a transporting schema and is visiting a range of areas within the center to collect materials. Environmental tracking could also be used as a research tool to inform educators about which areas of an early childhood environment are well used or which are infrequently used.

Event Recording

An event recording documents a particular kind of event on each occasion that it occurs. Often educators will record the specific event and information about what happened immediately prior and immediately afterward. In educational psychology, an event recording follows the sequence of *antecedent*, *behavior*, *consequence (ABC)*. For example, an event recording might document each time a child engages in biting, and analysis of the data reveals that the antecedent to the biting behavior was that the child wanted something another child had (e.g., a truck). The consequence prior to intervention was crying and angry children. An intervention – a change of routine – may become evident as an appropriate response to "the event." As a result of reviewing the assessment data, EC staff might amend behavior by providing additional popular toys (e.g., trucks) and consider related data, such as mealtimes and hunger.

Sociogram

These are observations of the children's social groups. The educator observes the children to see who or what the focus child is playing with, what they are playing, and for how long. When the child plays with different children, or changes activities with the same children, this is noted. Occasionally some children seem not to play with anyone, but on closer observation it is noted that they actually have a large social circle but only spend time briefly with each of their friends. This information can give a very powerful image of the child's social groups and social competence.

Work Samples

Samples of children's art, writing, and other symbolic representations are important forms of qualitative assessment documentation. These samples may be annotated by educators and then added to portfolios to document children's ways of exploring and expressing themselves using different media over time.

Photographs and Video Documentation

While photographs may be added to learning stories or other forms of assessment documentation, photos can also provide an alternative lens through which assessment is documented and analysis can be undertaken. Sometimes close scrutiny of photographs may illustrate contextual aspects that were not previously noted, for example, that a child always sought out red playthings. Similarly, videos provide opportunity for rich documentation of interpersonal and contextual context, for example, recording conversations.

Portfolios

Portfolios are not an assessment method as such, but they provide a mechanism to collate pedagogical documentation of various types. Portfolios provide an important form of documentation to share with parents and in many settings are readily available for children to access and reflect on their own learning, thus contributing to a child's ability

to use assessment material to learn about themselves and others and how they go about the process of learning.

The list above is not exhaustive; it does not include all the different forms of assessment or the different tools that could be used in an early childhood setting. For example, running records, tests, and standardized assessments (such as checklists) are used in many early childhood settings and by specialist providers working in partnership with ECE.

Discussion and Conclusion

Sociocultural assessment starts from the assumption that the child is of value themselves and positions the child as having strengths and competencies which can be observed, documented, and encouraged and made more complex, as well. Test taking, ranking, scoring, and comparative judgments have questionable relevance, benefit, or ethical practice in everyday early childhood education. *Formative assessment* is utilized in ECE, *and summative assessment* rarely so. In this way, early childhood assessment differs markedly from school-based assessment.

Therefore, sociocultural assessment is fundamentally different from normative assessment which emphasizes what a child has achieved or demonstrated when compared to what is normal (e.g., "normal" for a child of that age). In the context of early childhood education, the assessing of very young children can include the labelling of a child in ways which can do long-term harm by limiting a child to live up to that label. For example, as a result of a normative assessment, a child may be labelled as "below average" or "slow learner"; such labels can become self-reinforcing. Similarly, a child who is labelled as "smart" or "clever" may become anxious to achieve because these labels speak of identity, rather than of learning dispositions that encourage effort or application.

Sociocultural assessment is also based on different principles from those often seen as underpinning an "objective" approach to assessment which must be seen to be "fair," "valid," and "reliable." Assessment needs to be relevant to the cultural context of children. Parents have important information to share about their observations of children's competencies in a range of cultural and community contexts. When an assessment is understood to be collaborative – as it is in a sociocultural approach – the "subjective" voices of educators working in teams, of parents and wider family, and the child are intertwined. Subjectivity can be viewed as a strength rather than weakness, and it is a natural human phenomenon that different educators will observe different aspects of different children.

Thus, when considered socioculturally, assessment is recognized as an inherently value-laden activity. Through observation and assessment, through pedagogical documentation, educators can make "explicit, visible, shareable the elements of value (indicators) applied by the documenter in producing the documentation" (Rinaldi 2006, p. 72). The intentions of sociocultural assessment include that the adults – educators and parents – are able to deepen their understanding of young children's interests, strengths, and competencies. Concurrently, assessment aids educators to recognize areas of children's learning and development in which they may require more support and further nurturing. Therefore, assessment is an integral part of early childhood teaching, entwined with teaching and planning, and can also support advocacy for resourcing.

Critics of sociocultural assessment maintain that such systems are too open-ended and may be too complex to realistically undertake in the case of early education settings where there are many unqualified teachers and/or under-resourced working conditions. Thus, assessment – as experienced in context – reflects a mixture of many influences: the macro politics of international trends (e.g., the amplifying of the Reggio Emilia approach), the resourcing that is available to early childhood services from centralized sources (such as government), the micropolitics of how early childhood educators are encouraged to utilize their time, and the day-to-day relationships and interactions.

Best practice approaches to assessment in early childhood are those that value cultural perspective

and contexts and which highlight children's competence. A sociocultural approach to assessment makes explicit the connection between the child and educator knowledge. It is a series of connections that requires a relationship between the learner and the environment. Documenting and assessing children's learning and development this way is thus an integral part of early childhood education.

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