

Assignment 3

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ECED 585E 61A 2021W1

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Dec 7, 2021

Children's Sociocultural World and Assessment

I am an Early Childhood Educator (ECE), and I have been running my multi-age home child care facility since 2017. Throughout these years, I felt for children who were compared to each other or contrasted to universal tests to meet some criteria to be considered on track in terms of different skill developments, e.g., literacy skills. It is unfortunate that children in the educational system are to blame for being at a particular stage or situation, i.e., being behind compared to their peers, rather than for the assessments (Rameka, 2011).

In this paper, I have collected eight quotes that have particularly enhanced my understanding and influenced my point of view about sociocultural assessment in early years' education. I will present each paragraph with a quote, followed by my interpretation, other scholars' views, application of the quote to my ECE career and/or how it improved my knowledge. At the end of this paper, a brief, concluding reflection on assessment with and for children in the sociocultural context bundles the impressions emanating from the selected quotes.

Most Important Influence on Child Development

“Rather than being a universal skill, thinking is very much contextually specific, guided by others, and mediated by particular cultural tools and artefacts” (Robbins, 2005, p.143).

This quote resonated with me since it reveals the importance of context: macro and micro systems everyone grows up in, e.g., family, school and society. Many factors (social, economic, cultural, and family) impact a child's life beyond just the individual child. These circumstances put the child at the heart of a constant, dynamic interrelation with other people around the child and the child's environment. Robin (2005) and Weisner (2016) noted the optimum development for children happens within their society. Further, Weisner explained beliefs, set of values of the community and the context —place and culture— in which a child grows and lives shape children's development by having expectations from the child,

i.e., by defining the norms of that community as acceptable and more desirable. As an educator, I see many multicultural children who join my program. Each child fulfils Robin's (2005) notion by sticking to the aspects their community, family or previous educators highlighted for them, such as wearing hijab or speaking with teachers with excessive respect.

Through reflections on the importance of culture, the background each child brings to and shares in the child care center, I inquire about the role of assessment in relation to cultural influence on children in the contemporary multicultural world. In the subsequent paragraph, I will continue the investigation of assessment in children's sociocultural world by re-thinking dominant narratives in early learning assessment.

Contesting Dominant Stories in Assessment of Early Childhood Education and Care

“[Dominant discourses] become stories that have a decisive influence on a particular subject, for example, early childhood education, by insisting that they are the only way to think, talk, and behave: that they are the only reality” (Moss, 2019, p.14).

This quote challenged my understanding of the truths and reality of the dominant discourses in early childhood education, and assessment is one of them. According to Moss (2019), we are surrounded by many stories and ways of thinking. However, Moss explained that specific narratives become more dominant than others through the academic or government and by being imposed on our thoughts and actions until we make those truths the only reality to construct our world. For example, we might make assumptions and twist subjective viewpoints to the only objective, self-evident truths, presuming the objective, prepared assessment forms are more effective than our everyday interactions with children (Arndt and Tesa, 2015; Moss).

The universal assessment is one of those dominant narratives passed to educators for years without being questioned and criticized. Traditional assessment systems, e.g., standardized tests and achievement exams, evaluate children based on momentary and

discontinuous observations, such as judging children's abilities and areas for improvement in early childhood education and care. However, as Arndt and Tesar (2015) noted, a shift in the observing methods of assessment has to occur, and educators move from being observers and reporters of what children know, lack or need to improve to educators who influence children's learning within children's cultures and beliefs. By moving from the established assessment approach in early education and care, early learning practice can design curricula in which assessment occurs every moment by educators who listen, watch, interact and share stories with children.

By reviewing constructed values and beliefs in my ECE practice, I challenge every point of view I encounter. I pause and reconstruct my understanding every moment. For example, I shift from documenting my observations objectively to being subjective with children and with children through their learning. This individualized assessment outlook change provides children with more opportunities for conversations and for sharing their values, cultures and beliefs. The next paragraph provides more details about reflecting on assessment as an enriching approach rather than a regulating tool in teaching.

Assessment: A Controlling Measure, or a Re-thinking Teaching Framework?

“Overly controlling content and coherence by specifying outcomes and related assessment approaches in curricular documents runs the risk of creating the default pedagogical position of formal/didactic approaches” (Wood and Hedges, 2016, p.398).

This quote stood out to me since we, as educators, more or less have expectations of our teaching, and what the learners learn and understand throughout the learning process. As a result of having such a presumed outcome for our teaching, we force children to learn and practice and accordingly, an objective, momentary, predetermined assessment follows our pedagogy. Therefore, the purpose of assessment becomes only for evaluating the consequences of the class and not for children's engagement, interest and sharing stories. As

Wood and Hedges (2016) noted, assessment has built more on what educators perceive rather than focusing on children's interests and participation in activities. By investigating further in my practice through this quote, as Wood and Hedges suggested, I question my practice, the control, content, and coherence interwoven in the offered curriculum and reposition assessment through teaching by being with children. For example, by incorporating more story time and inviting more elders and families to the child care center, children in my program will feel more connected and have more to share, and assessment will have more to interrogate in learning besides teaching. In the following paragraph, I will elaborate on enhancing teaching through assessment, considering evaluation as a medium to enrich the curriculum with culturally diverse conversations.

Assessment: A Medium to Enrich and Rethink the Curriculum

“The purpose of assessment can be seen as a method for feeding into the teaching process, to improve the teaching itself, and to provoke a rethinking of pedagogies and a re-evaluation of teaching practices.” (Arndt & Tesar, 2015, p.74).

Arndt and Tesar (2015) stated that the word assessment more often might be associated with assessing the learners. However, as this quote suggests, assessment can improve teaching and elevate teaching standards, e.g., including children's diverse cultures in the curriculum and giving comprehensive attention to all children's needs. Assessment deepens one's teaching: through authentic observation, co-authoring and building personal connections, teachers are able to open up the environment in which children feel connected and welcome (Carr, 2011).

By incorporating assessment into the curriculum and considering assessment as an evaluation of my own ECE practice, I will re-assess and re-think my perception of assessment. I recognize that assessment is the fundamental aspect of teachers' judgments, the basis for teachers' continuous observations and interactions with each child, enabling

teachers to build relationships with children and families and encourage children to share their stories. Interrelations between educators and children play the main role in the assessment approach that I will briefly go over in the next quote.

Children's and Educators' Reciprocal Relationship in Assessment Process

"Teachers and learners reciprocally make meaning with each other, of their relationships, with the people, places and things in the learning environment and beyond" (Arndt & Tesar, 2015, p.78).

My general understanding was that assessment was the teacher's one-way objective observation for a long time. The teacher determined the learning process even after considering all children's individualities, i.e., children's interests, beliefs and values. However, according to Arndt and Tesar (2015), narrating identities integrate learners' and teachers' learning, interweaving learning stories and experiences by meaning-making together, educators and children, within the process of learning. Learning stories is a narrative of children's meaning-making and learning, described by text, accompanied by a photograph, an analysis of learning. Learning stories document children's learning by teachers, dictated by children, to make learning more holistic, e.g., incorporating books and sand that involve blocks in the routine for a child interested in playing with blocks (Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Carr, 2011).

I have applied Arndt and Tesar's (2015) meaning-making assessment approach to my practice as a holistic identity, contesting the traditional observations and shaping our community: I, the educator, and the children. I have moved from separated happenings that measured only isolated, interrelated real-life processes to a complex and holistic approach that works together in the learning process. For instance, I have shifted viewing children from only motor skills or intellectual development perspectives to the whole child, their interests, emotions, body and mind. Arndt and Tesar suggested providing mutual chances for children's

voices and stories to be heard and observed; accordingly, as an ECE, I plan the curriculum in which learning stories create opportunities for teachers and children to assess the unseen and the unknown together. Children's self-assessment brings us to the next quote, improving children's perception and recognition of their own learning and evaluation.

Assessment and Children's Voices: Enhancing Children's Learning Wisdom

“When the children were co-authoring the conversation, they tended to take it in unexpected directions” (Carr, 2011, p. 263).

As an ECE, I used to know teaching children as telling them what to do, what to expect next, and how to do things, in short stealing their autonomy. Assessment was not an exception in my preceding understanding of early childhood education, to be an educator, not a companion. The above quote from Carr (2011) resonated with me since it gives children the autonomy of research, agency, thinking and being creators of their stories. As Carr suggested, through children's reflections on their learning, they become wise about their learning journeys and come up with unpredicted stories. For example, a child sees a phone photo at circle time and starts talking about her dad, who does not live with them anymore. By sharing stories and giving children the freedom of topic exploration, educators avoid conventional, pre-written checklists to evaluate children's situations, e.g., being behind in literacy skills. Teachers, instead, shift their goals through conversations and building relationships and being with children. Throughout this individualized approach, educators support children's understanding of their learning formation and what and how children have gone through in their learning process.

As I revisited my practice, I adopted Carr's (2011) notion and extended children's abilities and dispositions into our everyday discussions by considering children as co-authors of their learning construction. For instance, by giving children the liberty of exploration, I provide the children in my program with the opportunities to promote the potential dynamic

connections they are surrounded with, e.g., interactions with the educator, peers and environment. Continuous conversations bring ideas to children's consciousness and enable them to self-reflect and re-assess their thoughts. In this narrative process, children become their own evaluators, revisiting and reviewing their past, present and future event stories. Children build up meaning-making experiences while constructing self-stories about being a learner (Carr). In the process of self-evaluation, children share and document their learning stories by making portfolios. In the next paragraph, I will discuss the way children do documentation of their participation and engagement —creating portfolios— based on children's goals.

Assessment Through Developing Portfolios and Children's Learning Stories

“Portfolios can also include learning stories. Learning stories are a narrative mode of documenting children's learning in order to make learning more accessible to children, parents and teachers” (Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth, 2014, p. 33).

I chose this quote because it connects documentation and children's learning stories through portfolios, which play a key role in early childhood education assessment as portfolios allow children to take responsibility and control of their learning. According to Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth (2014), documentation emphasizes the connection between examination, reflection and interpretation. Through portfolios, educators delegate documentation of children's learning stories to children by letting them take ownership of their learning and assessment rather than using standardized tests (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth; Grace, 1992; Sherfinski, Jalalifard, Zhang & Hayes, 2019). Portfolios are not supposed to be used to compare children to each other but rather constantly document each child's improvement over time (Alasuutari, Markström, & Vallberg-Roth; Grace, 1992).

In my ECE practice, I support children's story-sharing by creating their portfolios in making portfolios. Children's engagement goes beyond enabling them to self-assess their

learning process. Through portfolio making, children have agency and act autonomously. Portfolios are a personalized assessment approach based on each child's sociocultural point of view, i.e., children take the responsibility and make portfolios of authentic situations of their childhoods. Consequently, based on each child's reflection in their portfolios and their learning stories, as an educator, I individualize the curriculum and program, including being culturally inclusive. Investigating neoliberalism and its footprints in early learning and assessment is the last topic I will discuss in the following paragraph.

Are Sociocultural Perspectives Enough in Early Learning Assessment?

“Often students’ interests are focused on one question: “What can I do to get an A in your class?” (Vintimilla, 2014, p. 80).

With its focus on grades, this quote provokes the evaluation of assessment in early learning contexts. The concept of neoliberalism (e.g., being related to economic systems) may seem irrelevant to working with children. However, looking at neoliberalism in early education is necessary since neoliberal terms and narrations, such as tests and assessments go around as the only truth (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vintimilla, 2014). Vintimilla (2014) stated that in the context of education, students play the role of clients who accumulate credits to get their degrees which makes them the entrepreneurs of their own knowledge. Hence, all students’ focus is on fulfilling the requirements of tests, and through neoliberal thinking or governing human behaviours, students practice learning as a trading system.

Likewise, Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) contested neoliberalism as the only truth and criticized imagining no alternative narrations and viewed neoliberalism as questionable, resistible and exchangeable thinking. According to Roberts-Holmes and Moss, neoliberalism emphasized standardization, the absence of curriculum, and recognized children as future investments. Therefore, by lifting children’s subjectivity and autonomy neoliberalism has had a negative impact on early learning.

With the critique of neoliberalism, as an ECE, I encourage children's subjectivity by creating diverse experiences for them and not governing their emotions. For instance, through portfolio-making and sharing stories, children will be able to connect and co-construct their learning.

Final Reflections

In conclusion, investigating assessment in education seems critical due to the outcome it brings to children's lives particularly once sociocultural perspective achievement is situated. As an ECE, I would love to evaluate and improve the early childhood education and care assessment approach in the context of the sociocultural world. First, by examining other alternative narratives, I question accepting neoliberalism thinking, including assessment in early education and care. Second, supporting children's autonomous movement in making them self-conscious of their cultural values, interests, voices and choices is another way to develop assessment in early care and learning. Third, holding a holistic, reciprocal approach provides children with the chance to self-assess their learning process.

All in all, I believe evaluation is never separated from one's teaching practice. Rather than focusing on observing children's learning and progress momentarily, assessment should be embedded in early education routine, from curriculum planning to morning greetings with families and children, wiping tears, sharing laughs, providing care and love, listening to their stories, creating their portfolios, and evening goodbyes.

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