Using DSE to 'Notice, Recognize and Respond' to Tools of Exclusion and
Opportunities for Inclusion in New Zealand

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I describe three ways that Disability Studies in Education (DSE) informs our work on curriculum assessment in New Zealand. First, DSE provides a framework for interrogating practices of exclusion in education. Education has a (long) history of being unequally available to all students. Traditionally, in New Zealand as elsewhere, the role of assessment (and expert assessors) has been to decide which students get access to which types of education. Traditional forms of assessment focus on the individual. DSE suggests how this focus on the performance of individual has unintended negative consequences. Second, DSE suggests possibilities for inclusive education. When learning is understood as co-constructed, new approaches to assessment are needed. In this paper I describe a New Zealand project to support teachers to use *narrative assessment* as an approach that supports teachers to *notice, recognise and respond* to students' competences, with a developing understanding of learning as co-constructed. Narrative assessment supports teachers to get to know their students' interests and strengths and use these to support learning; to build relationships with their students and their students' families. I conclude by describing how DSE reminds us to be always vigilant to the pull of powerful normatizing discourses.

**Key Words:** curriculum, pedagogy, assessment

Introduction

A key contribution of Disability Studies in Education has been to broaden our scope of investigation, to widen the lens, so to speak. Disability Studies in Education invites researchers, practitioners, and practitioner-researchers to step back from both 'special education'[1] and so-called 'regular education' practice-as-usual and to ask 'what else is going on here?' (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher & Morton 2008). This involves looking in different places as well as using different frameworks to make sense of what is seen. Attending to 'regular education' practices shifts the focus from the discursively produced deficits of *individual* students (and their families) to the daily, normative practices of education that simultaneously exclude while obfuscating practices of exclusion. In the first part of this paper I describe the ways traditional assessment practices focus on the individual. Models of assessment are embedded in understandings of teaching and learning. I show how this focus on the individual learner often has the effect, however unintended, of isolating and excluding disabled students and their families.

Disability Studies in Education can also suggest frameworks that allow us to recognize new possibilities for developing inclusive practices within 'regular education' practices (Gabel, 2005; Gallagher, 2004). Again, this involves both looking in different places and using different frameworks to 'notice, recognize and respond' to what is seen. The phrase 'notice, recognize and respond' comes from work on narrative assessment in New Zealand (Carr, 2001). In the second part of the paper I describe a project to develop exemplars of curriculum assessment that supported the introduction of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The

*New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs* (Ministry of Education, 2009a) built on explicitly socio-cultural perspectives on teaching and learning that underpin large sections of the 2007 *New Zealand Curriculum*.

In the final section of the paper I describe some experiences in New Zealand that illustrate the value of Disability Studies in Education as a tool for monitoring development of policies and practices.

Assessment and Exclusion

In this section, I illustrate how traditional practices of assessment have contributed to the exclusion of disabled children. Educational assessment of individuals has traditionally served a gatekeeping role, determining who would have access to scarce educational and other resources. Individual assessment using psychometric tools claimed to be able to determine which individuals, or groups of individuals, would most benefit from resources (Broadfoot, 2007; Gipps, 1994; James, 2006; Selden, 2000; Valle & Connor, 2010). Ironically, many children and young people in New Zealand were never assessed using these tools, as the tools themselves were highly verbal in nature. Because the tools were extremely verbal in nature, they were both inaccessible and biased. Despite never actually being formally assessed, many children and young people in New Zealand were 'diagnosed' as severely or profoundly mentally impaired – essentially by professionals just looking at the person. While it was not possible to formally administer these intelligence tests, children and young people were nevertheless given labels based on the tests, such as severely or profoundly mentally retarded. In New Zealand, as elsewhere, these labels led to a view of some groups of children as *ineducable.* In turn, this meant that they did not attend any kind of educational facility and they did not receive any kind of education. In New Zealand it was only with the change of the *Education Act* (1989) that *all* children were entitled to go to their local school (Millar & Morton, 2007; Wills, 2006; Wills & McLean, 2008. It still comes as a surprise to many New Zealanders to learn that there were groups of children legally excluded from school until 1989 (Millar & Morton, 2007).

In the subsequent twenty-plus years more and more disabled children and young people have been enrolled at their family's local school. Exclusion on the grounds of disability is no longer legal but continues to be the experience of many students and their families (Gordon & Morton, 2008; Macartney & Morton, 2012; Wills, 2006. The role of individual assessment, both medical and educational assessment, continues to be implicated in exclusion (Macartney & Morton, 2011). Unlike many education systems, (e.g. US and UK) there is no diagnostic assessment for educational placement in New Zealand. There is however assessment for allocation of resources. These resources are not based on diagnostic category, but do require applicants to build a picture of need for support, painting a rather bleak picture of a student's list of failures and weaknesses. Families find this disheartening, as do many teachers who prefer to build on their students' interests and strengths (Morton & McMenamin, 2011).

By adopting a Disability Studies in Education framework, the experiences of exclusion may be understood from a socio-political model of disability. Two understandings are made possible. First, rather than assuming that all difficulties arise from particular differences inherent within an individual, it is now possible to see that the *processes* of identifying differences and allocating resources themselves contribute to, and justify, exclusion. That is, students'

differences are not a justification for exclusion. An important corollary for teaching and learning is that students' differences cannot be used as an explanation for why we haven't supported their presence, participation and belonging in local classrooms and the curriculum (Connor et al., 2008; Macartney & Morton, 2011; Morton & McMenamin, 2011). Drawing on an interpretivist understanding of the social construction of differences, and in particular disability, we can pay attention to the ways the meanings of differences are negotiated, shared, reified and resisted. Interpretivism can also attend to the ways meanings intersect, shape, and are shaped by, and within, discourses and hegemonic practices. In educational research, important contenders for attention are the socially constructed meanings of teaching, learning, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment.

Broadfoot notes that assessment models in education "work to shape the way people think about and practice education" (Broadfoot, 2007, p.24). It might be expected then that a model of *individual* assessment that is premised on expert knowledge used to diagnose and then prescribe teaching to remediate or 'fix' a disabled individual could shape the ways teachers think about and practice education in relation to that individual. Smith and Barr (2008) have described this as the "ideology of the individual" (p.405), common in many educators' understandings and practices. Here the focus in on the development and learning of an individual; in response to the work, or instruction, of the individual teacher. All learning and development is expected to follow clearly defined trajectories that are universal and predictable. Context is largely irrelevant. Understandings of curriculum, teaching and learning are largely, if tacitly, based on an understanding of knowledge as fact, pedagogy an act of transfer from the individual expert teacher to the individual and inexpert student. Smith and Barr (2008) further note that in this individualistic conceptualization, learning is understood as being "individual and affected by ability which is seen as fixed" (p.408). These are the views of learning that underpin traditional forms of educational measurement and assessment and that are rewarded in traditional measures of educational achievement (Gipps, 1994; Hipkins, 2007).

It is not surprising then that many so-called 'regular classroom' teachers believe they are unprepared for including students with disabilities in their classrooms. Paugh and Dudley-Marling (2011) describe how deficit thinking, the "unrelenting focus on what students cannot do" (p.820) impacts teachers' sense of what they can accomplish. If we consider the views of teaching and learning described by Smith and Barr (2008) we might expect that, when teachers see "learning = being taught" then these teachers have difficulty seeing themselves as teachers when they do not view as learners some of the children and young people in their classrooms (Millar & Morton, 2007; Morton & McMenamin, 2011).

Disability Studies in Education is interested in moving beyond critical examination of past and current practices (Gabel, 2005; Gallagher, 2004; Valle & Connor, 2010). Gallagher (2004) enjoins Disability Studies in Education scholars to also consider the implications of social constructionist or interpretivist understandings for teaching and learning. As well as scholars in Disability Studies in Education, other educators and curriculum theorists have been considering these implications. In New Zealand, sociocultural understandings of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have been a feature of *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood education curriculum, since 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996) which states "Children learn through responsive and

reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things" (p.14). Margaret Carr has led this work in New Zealand (see, for example, Carr, 2001).

James (2006) has also challenged the focus on the individual as learner. Writing about the close connections between assessment, teaching and theories of learning she argues that new approaches to assessment need to pay attention to both social and individual learning *processes* as well as outcomes. James suggests that we might look to those disciplines (such as sociology, anthropology and social psychology) that explicitly focus on how people make sense of their world, and the interactive nature of their sense making. An earlier example of insights from sociology is found in Wansart's (1995) article titled "Teaching as a way of knowing: Observing and responding to students' abilities" and published in a special issue of *Remedial and Special Education.* Wansart opens his paper stating:

> "Teacher research is about the knowledge created when teachers seek to discover the stories the students reveal about themselves as learners… Teacher researchers observe and describe the details of individual learners within the context of the classroom, the family and the community… Teacher researchers collect and combine their observations so that they may understand and interpret what students are telling them about their learning. Their primary purpose is to allow these *stories of ability* to change their teaching as they respond to their developing understanding of each student." (pp.166-167)

Wansart is of course describing the tools of ethnography, participant observation with its rich description of context and conversations. He is also describing the aims of ethnography, to understand the perspectives of participants and the meanings they make of and give to their lives.

Wansart draws on the interpretive work of Ferguson, Ferguson and Taylor (1992), concluding with these authors that one purpose of telling stories, particularly the stories of traditionally disadvantaged groups, is to make a difference to how teachers see their work, with the explicit purpose of improving what happens in the classroom. Wansart notes that when teachers report their work about listening to students' stories, they often tell transformative stories. Teachers' stories of students' learning – assessment that is reported to other teachers for example – can support or undermine students' identities as learners. The impact of assessment on teaching and learning cannot be overstated. Hatherly and Richardson go so far as to claim "We can only transform curriculum and pedagogy by also transforming the way we assess learning" (Hatherly & Richardson, 2007, p.51).

In this section I have described some of the ways that Disability Studies in Education offers new approaches to interpreting disability and understanding exclusion. The understandings about disability as socially constructed, together with the implications of social construction for teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment, informed the development of the resources for curriculum assessment described in the next section. Where traditionally assessment has been of the individual, and *assessment of learning*, in the next section the focus turns to *assessment for learning*.

<center>Curriculum Assessment and Inclusion</center>

In 2006 to 2009 I was fortunate to lead a project (funded by the Ministry of Education) to research and develop the *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs* (Ministry of Education, 2009a) and the accompanying resource *Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers* (Ministry of Education, 2009b). The contract for the work stipulated the following outcomes:

- The scope of the *Guide* and the *Exemplars* is for *all* teachers, whose classes include students who, throughout most of their time at school, are working within Level One of the *New Zealand Curriculum;*
- Raise expectations for the group of students as active learners;
- Show that the New Zealand Curriculum is relevant for all students;
- Is focused on assessment of the Key Competencies within the context of the Learning Areas in *The New Zealand Curriculum;* and
- Illustrate an approach to assessment that could capture the complexity of learning that happens in the context of relationships (a socio-cultural perspective on teaching and learning).

The project team consisted of curriculum and assessment facilitators working in Education Plus, the teacher professional learning arm of the College of Education at the University of Canterbury. The curriculum and assessment facilitators were not special educators. Their areas of expertise included a deep knowledge of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and the principles and practices of assessment for learning, or formative assessment. These facilitators worked alongside 26 classroom teachers (the majority in 'regular' classrooms) to develop the curriculum exemplars. The facilitators and teachers met regularly over the two years of exemplar development to share readings that challenged traditional notions of disability, curriculum and assessment. The readings also provided support in developing a sociocultural framework to guide the development of the exemplars. In our regular meetings we shared, critiqued and workshopped the exemplars and the guide to narrative assessment. Morton and McMenamin (2011) provide a more detailed description of the project (the resources can be found online at www.throughdifferenteyes.org.nz).

This project built on earlier work developing exemplars of curriculum assessment. The project also took advantage of new spaces and opportunities available in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) released during the course of the project. In the school sector, the *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2003) were developed to support teachers to assess student learning against the levels of outcome in the seven subject areas of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993). The *Framework* was an outcomes or standards-based curriculum. On its assessment website (TKI), the Ministry of Education describes exemplars and their purpose:

"An exemplar is an authentic piece of student work, annotated to illustrate learning, achievement, and quality in relation to the levels in the national curriculum statement. The purpose is to highlight features that teachers need to watch for, collect information about, and act on to promote learning. Exemplars help to answer the question, 'What is quality work?'"

In the early childhood education sector the curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is organized around a constellation of interconnected learning dispositions. The name of the curriculum, *Te Whāriki,* translates roughly to a woven mat, and this is the visual metaphor to describe the relationships of the different aspects of the early childhood curriculum. The dispositions, or strands, of *Te Whāriki* are belonging, contributing, well-being, exploration and communication. Assessment of the dispositions is supported by a series of booklets and on-line resources, *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004-2009):

> *"Kei Tua o te Pae* explores and informs assessment practice in early childhood education. Everyday assessments from a range of early childhood settings have been selected as exemplars to explore important assessment and learning questions. They are not necessarily "exemplary" in the sense of being excellent or perfect, but rather they illustrate a wide range of learning experiences in a range of assessment formats. The exemplars strongly reflect the principles of *Te Whāriki* and sociocultural approaches to learning and teaching. The core framework of noticing, recognising, and responding is at the heart of effective assessment and quality teaching practice."

In these two excerpts we can see the Ministry of Education now uses the framework of "notice, recognize and respond" to describe the purposes of assessment in both the early childhood and school curriculum documents. In the school sector the framework is offered as "need to watch for, collect information about, and act on to promote learning" (2004-2009).

The introduction of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) included both traditional individualistic and sociocultural understandings of curriculum and pedagogy. The subject or learning areas were slightly expanded, but continue to be framed and presented in a matrix of (presumably) increasing levels of difficulty. Each curriculum area is presented as a relatively standalone subject. This new curriculum also introduced the *Key Competencies*. The five competencies are thinking, managing self, participating and contributing, using language symbols and texts and relating to others. The key competencies draw on knowledge, attitudes and values. They are both "a means to an end and a valued educational outcome." The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, p.12) describes how key competencies involve the learner in engaging personal goals, other people, community knowledge and values, cultural tools and the knowledge and skills found in learning areas. "People use these competencies to live, learn, work and contribute as active members of their communities" (Ministry of Education, p.12).

Hipkins (2007), writing about assessing these key competencies states, "New dimensions of learning are highlighted by the inclusion of the key competencies at the heart of the curriculum. These dimensions challenge some assumptions that are deeply embedded in traditional assessment practices" (p. 5):

- The knowledge, skill, or attitude being assessed is in a fixed state, what the test shows now is true forever.
- If the learning sampled in this one assessment is valid then the result is indicative of overall learning and ability in this area.

- Competency resides in individuals separately from the contexts in which they demonstrate it.
- Variations in an individual's assessment results that occur on different but related occasions are caused by measurement errors or poorly designed tasks.

In this project, we were particularly interested in approaches to assessment that focused on noticing students' competence. We built on the work of Carr and colleagues who developed the narrative approach to assessment (Carr, 2001; Cowie & Carr, 2009): "We take the view that learning and development, rather than being primarily about individual achievement, is distributed over, stretched across, people, places and things" (Cowie & Carr, 2009, p.105). We were interested in supporting teachers to pay attention to the contexts that supported students to show that they were competent; more importantly, teachers began to recognize that students were showing evidence of learning, and that learning could be directly linked to the subject areas of the *New Zealand Curriculum.*

We drew on the work of Carr and colleagues because we sought an approach to assessment that focused on looking for and reporting on the learning that students were able to show when given sufficient opportunities to demonstrate their competence. We sought an alternative to traditional forms of assessment that purported to show what children and young people should be doing at particular ages or class level "constructing children's learning and development as universal and children as passive recipients of knowledge" (Macartney & Morton, 2011). We chose to explore the narrative assessment approach because it focuses on actions and relationships. This approach enables the teacher to see the child and their learning in a wider context. The narrative assessment approach does not compare students to others, nor to standards. In this way narrative assessment values and fosters the students' progress and achievement at the same time recognizing that this progress is socially mediated and co-constructed.

The above characteristics of narrative assessment can be related to Wansart's (1995) description of the aims of teacher research: to capture stories of students' abilities. Like Wansart's work, narrative assessment draws on the traditions and principles of phenomenology and interpretivism – a search for understanding the ways that people (students and teachers) make sense of the world(s) they live and act in and upon. Qualitative researchers/participant observers need to be mindful of the ways their worldviews frame the questions they ask, what they see and hear when they observe and how they subsequently represent and construct people and places (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001). Teachers using narrative assessment need to be similarly reflexive, paying equal attention to their role in creating and supporting teaching and learning opportunities, catching themselves in the act of seeing and constructing competence or incompetence.

There were a number of important outcomes from the project. The exemplars clearly show that narrative assessment was fostering students' identities as learners. Through making their learning visible and strengthening links to the curriculum, teachers had raised expectations for this group of students. Fostering students' identities as learners also fostered teachers' identities as learners:

"It also appeared that by using narrative assessment to reflect on student learning and teacher learning, the teachers began to facilitate different learning opportunities and provide students with support for new learning. We would suggest that these changes were facilitated by the nature of NZ revised curriculum which allows teachers to reframe and reinterpret what their students do, particularly when the key competencies are used as a lens through which to view student behaviours.  The teachers in the project concurred that this perspective enabled them to give value to certain behaviours that they could now recognise as demonstrating achievement within the context of a learning area." (Morton & McMenamin, 2011, p. 112)

The teachers on the project described the assessment as meaningful, providing them with valuable information to reflect on their teaching and to consider next steps for students' learning. It supported building positive relationships with families through valuing families' input (because learning also happens outside of the classroom and school) and providing families with stories that celebrated students' learning. Narrative assessment challenged traditional relationships between teachers and students' families. It supported more democratic relationships by seeking and respecting the voices of students and their families, as well as professionals.

Conclusion: We Need to Keep Noticing, Recognising and Responding

As Cowie and Carr (2009) have noted, assessments are a means by which competence and competent learners are constructed. They have for too long been primarily sites where incompetence has been constructed.

In our exemplars project, we started from the position that learning always occurs in social-political-cultural contexts. Educational transformation will not come about through focusing only on the learning of *individual* children. Our assessment practices need to also reflect these wider social-political-cultural contexts. Macartney and Morton (2011) outline a number of problems arising from focusing only on the individual, particularly the individual's deficits that may in fact be a product of the individualised, decontextualised approaches to assessment: "Viewing a child's 'impairment/s' or 'deficits' as the *defining influence* on their behaviour, participation and learning decontextualises learning and teaching and diverts attention from the multiple influences on a child within the socio-cultural environment" (Macartney & Morton, 2011, p.15). A result of this view is that any and all difficulties in teaching and learning are constructed as inherently residing within the learner. Teachers may not think to look more broadly at the student's interactions with the people, places and things that provide the context for teaching and learning.  The exemplars show the importance of context for noticing children's learning. Teachers are part of this context, as are the opportunities they create for children to show their understanding and competence. Teachers' frameworks for interpreting children's actions also form part of the context.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, we need to continue to be vigilant to the individualising practices of assessment embedded in policies that supposedly aim to support success for all learners. Within inclusive education policy, the adoption of the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) in New Zealand is a case in point. We have seen how some IEPs have become the default curriculum for some students, rather than a space for considering how well educators are doing to ensure students have access to and participate in the curriculum (Millar & Morton, 2007;

Mitchell, Morton & Hornby, 2010). Mitchell et al. noted that "IEPs suffer from having multiple purposes ascribed to them, the same IEP document frequently being expected to serve educational, legal, planning, accountability, placement, and resource allocation purposes" (Mitchell et al., 2010, p. 22). We were able to use our learning from the exemplars project to inform the development of the new IEP guidelines, emphasizing that all students learn with the *New Zealand Curriculum,* the collaborative element of planning including parents and students, and the importance of the quality of the relationship between teacher and student (Ministry of Education, 2011). The new guidelines are called *Collaboration for success: Individual education plans*. The guidelines compare what an IEP is and what it is not. For example:

> "An IEP is a plan that brings together knowledge and contributions, from the student and those who best know them, about the student's learning needs, aspirations, personality, and cultural background. An IEP is NOT a document prepared by professionals to be signed off by a student's parents/caregivers." (Ministry of Education, 2011, p.6)

In addition, the guidelines note "Team members might include: the student – who is at the heart of the IEP team, their parents/caregivers and members of their whānau, hapū, iwi, or other communities, school staff, including teachers, teacher aides, and school leaders; specialists" (p. 8). The guidelines clearly state that the *New Zealand Curriculum* is for all students. The IEP is one of the ways the school shows how it will adapt its teaching and learning programme to include the student, rather than require the student to fit the programme.

However, these are guidelines only. Guidelines, curricula, pedagogy and assessment are contested at the political level as well as at the school and classroom levels. Educational assessment of individuals has recently taken on a role in accountability in New Zealand, under the guise of National Standards. Primary (elementary) schools will be assessed and publicly reported for how well individual students are performing against national standards in literacy and numeracy. Two outcomes are likely: The focus of teaching becomes what is assessed in high stakes testing. The richness of curriculum becomes diminished under these conditions. Further, it may not be in schools' interests to include those students who will not 'show progress' on the traditional measures of school performance. There is an ongoing need for using understandings from Disability Studies in Education to 'notice, recognize and respond' to assessment practices that promote exclusion.

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Endnotes

[1] By placing everyday expressions such as 'special education' and 'regular education' within single quotes I am signaling that the meanings of these expressions need to be problematised. In this paper I am attending to the ways understandings of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are assumed to work within these settings.