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Brisbane Australia

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[Klenowski, Valentina](#) (2012) *Learning communities learning series*. [Working Paper] (Unpublished)

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Learning Communities Learning Series

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This paper defines some key terms and introduces some important issues related to assessment and culture that have become prominent in Australia in this era of high stakes testing and accountability.

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Introduction

In 2008 the introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), combined with the publication of the international comparative analyses of student achievement data (such as the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)) highlighted a significant priority for Australian education by identifying low levels of equity.

A context of accountability, measurement and performance standards prevails during this time of curriculum and assessment reform with the introduction of a national curriculum and achievement standards. To address the disparity that continues to exist between the highest and lowest achievers equity issues of fairness, validity, cultural difference and access need to be understood by principals and teachers. These issues are discussed in light of recently published literature and research.

Key terms

Before expanding upon these important equity issues it is useful to define some key terms and to explain briefly the underpinning sociocultural theory of the view of learning adopted throughout this paper. First, **assessment** has been defined as “the purposeful and systematic collection of evidence about students’ achievements” (QSA, 2012, p. 13).

Teachers will be familiar with how at the judgement-level of purpose (Newton, 2010) assessment results in terms of an A – E grade are used to report the achievement of individual students. This is summative assessment. In classroom practice teachers are familiar with using evidence or assessment data to monitor students’ achievements throughout the course or year level. Teachers often draw on their observations of students completing assessment and learning tasks, and other assessment data collected during classroom teaching, learning and assessment activities, to decide whether the student is experiencing difficulty in learning a particular concept or idea. At this decision-level of

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purpose (Newton, 2010) of assessment the teacher provides appropriate feedback to the student about how to take the next steps in her learning, or the teacher may decide to intervene to scaffold the student's learning. This decision-level of purpose is formative and is similar to student monitoring, diagnosis or continuous assessment. Assessment is also defined as a social practice, which shares similarities with learning, in that they are both interactive and contextual (Mahuika, Berryman & Bishop, 2011; Stobart, 2008).

Second, **achievement** has been defined as "the extent to which a student has demonstrated knowledge, skills, values and attitudes as the result of the teaching/learning process" (QSA, 2012, p. 13). An important understanding identified by recent research is that there exists a strong association between a student's background and identity, and achievement no matter what level of schooling is considered (McNaughton, 2011). A number of explanations exist in relation to this proposition and these are discussed.

Third, a **sociocultural view of learning** underpins the analysis of assessment and culture presented here. From this theoretical view an individual's sociocultural context is understood to be influential in the development of one's values, beliefs, understanding and sense making of the world, and one's identity and position, within it (Mahuika, Berryman & Bishop, 2011; Murphy & Hall, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). **Culture** influences students' learning and their assessments. However, many teachers are unaware of how to deal with the **cultural variations** of their students in the way they teach and assess. Due to this lack of understanding teachers can often fail to respond to the particular cultural needs of their students (Mahuik & Bishop, n.d. p. 6). A sociocultural view of learning and knowing recognizes the cultural variations in the nature of learning and what constitutes valued knowledge (Murphy & Hall, 2008). This position also values the *cultural legacies* that an individual learner draws upon and the connections made by prior generations, which are often mediated by the **cultural tools** they inherit (Rogoff, 2003 cited by Murphy & Hall, 2008).

From this sociocultural theoretical position, learning is understood as 'becoming' a full participant (Murphy & Hall, 2008) in the community of learners of the school or the classroom. This can refer to a teacher who is 'becoming' more competent in teaching and assessing, using more culturally relevant pedagogy to build her assessment identity and assessment repertoire. Or, it can refer to an Indigenous student whose identity as a learner strengthens, and whose sense of 'belonging' develops, through greater participation and engagement involving interaction and negotiation with other learners during classroom teaching and learning activities. A sociocultural perspective then, defines learning in terms of this sense of 'becoming' and 'belonging' (Murphy & Hall, 2008) through participation and change of identity (or identities) with acceptance into the community of learners through effortful teaching and improved relationships. An understanding of how this theoretical stance relates to assessment issues of fairness, validity and equity is provided prior to a discussion of recent research findings as to how teachers might address these issues.

Assessment Issues

Fair and Valid Assessment

Teachers assess students' learning to identify what they have learned, what they have not learned and where they are having difficulty. Assessment, because of its concern with what students have learned, is also based on a conception of the nature of learning and learners. When considering the fairness of the assessments there is a need then to be clear about these conceptions underlying the specific assessments (Gipps & Murphy, 1994). In addition to these conceptions of the nature of learning and learners, it is important in terms of equity, to consider the choice of knowledge and skills selected for the assessments. To achieve equity, the curriculum needs to include valued knowledge and skills consisting of different kinds of cultural knowledge and experience, reflective of all groups, not privileging one group to the exclusion of others.

Research to date identifies fair assessment as a qualitative concern related to **equity** and **what is just**, and considers how this impacts on **access** to learning and access to the curriculum (Gipps and Murphy 1994; Stobart 2005). As expressed by Gipps & Murphy (1994) there is "[n]o such thing as a fair test and nor could there be as the situation is too complex and the notion too simplistic" (p. 273). However, as Stobart (2008) suggests "[w]e will never achieve fair assessment but we can make it fairer" (p. 113).

Assessments have to be as fair as we can make them and issues of student access to curriculum and the framing of assessment tasks require teacher understanding of the relationships between teaching, curriculum and assessment, particularly in the current high-stakes accountability context. Fairness of any test or assessment depends on whether the students are able to make sense of what is required. It is important for those students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups or those from backgrounds of poverty and social disadvantage to be provided with opportunities to offer evidence of their expertise. To achieve assessment that is as fair as possible teachers use a range of modes and task styles. The use of rich tasks and more authentic assessments is an attempt to achieve more valid forms of assessment.

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In 1989, Michael Apple expressed how important it was for *curricular questions* to address equity issues of gender and race.

- Whose knowledge is taught?
- Why is it taught in a particular way to this particular group?
- How do we enable the histories and cultures of people of color, and of women, to be taught in responsible and responsive ways?

Caroline Gipps and Patricia Murphy (1994) later built on these curriculum questions and introduced these significant *assessment questions* that are equally relevant to teachers' practice today:

- What knowledge is assessed and equated with achievement?
- Are the form, content and mode of assessment appropriate for different groups and individuals?
- Is this range of cultural knowledge reflected in definitions of achievement?
- How does cultural knowledge mediate individuals' responses to assessment in ways, which alter the construct being assessed?

Recently Gordon Stobart (2005) has raised the following *access issues*, which need to be understood by teachers as they underpin the curriculum, assessment practice and related literacy demands:

- What is incorporated from the cultures of those attending?
- Who gets taught and by whom?
- Are there differences in the resources available for different groups?

Together these questions highlight how all students need to be provided with opportunities to demonstrate their learning by having valid tasks and assessments designed and developed at local and state levels. As Gipps (1994) notes, "Openness about design, constructs and scoring, will bring out into the open the values and biases of the test design process, offer an opportunity for debate about cultural and social influences, and open up the relationship between the assessor and the learner." (p. 385)

The focus on these curricular and assessment questions has increased awareness regarding the need for strategies to develop assessment practices to address equity issues more effectively. For example, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) guidelines recommend that assessment agencies:

*... evaluate the occurrence in assessment instruments of reproductions of gender, socioeconomic, ethnic or other cultural stereotypes; conduct equity scanning of assessment instruments before use; promote research into the validity and **fairness of assessment items** for which the agency is responsible and employ specialist editors to examine the language of assessment instruments in terms of possible barriers to equal opportunity for all students. (ACACA, 1995, p. 1)*

Teachers need to be aware of group and cultural differences and to understand the interaction of the mode of assessment with the construct assessed and student experience, to ensure that there is access for all, in terms of what is being asked in the assessment task or test. They should also be aware of society's views and expectations of, the abilities of different student groups, and how this impacts on expectation, teaching and the curriculum offered (Gipps & Murphy, 1994, p. 277).

Cultural Difference and Equity

Students from a non-dominant culture can experience testing as a form of ***cultural intimidation***

Many teachers are unaware that there is ***no cultural neutrality*** in assessment or in the selection of what is assessed. In this light, Cumming (2000) asks "When setting standards and test content, are we really sure that this is the knowledge we need?" or

"Are we really privileging certain knowledges to maintain a dominant culture, and, in so doing, ensuring perpetuation of ourselves, as people who have succeeded in the formal educational culture to date?" (p. 4). These questions, while they relate to the questions raised earlier in terms of fair and valid assessment, highlight the importance of ***cultural difference*** and equity concerns. Equity does not mean treating students all the same or equality of outcomes. Rather the concept relates to cultural difference and issues of access and what is just.

Students from a non-dominant culture can "experience testing as a form of ***cultural intimidation*** ... students from particular ethnic and racial groups may actually develop attitudes and practices of resistance to the surveillance, judgement and categorisation practices that are affiliated with large-scale testing" (Berlack, 2001, as cited in Luke, Woods, Land, Bahr and McFarland, 2002, p. 11). Fair assessment does not favour culturally different groups above others. On the contrary, it is important to recognise cultural differences and to investigate the possible impact on student performance in the context of assessment and standardised tests. ***Cultural-specific variables*** said to influence test performance include those related to content knowledge, the framing of the task, the normative models of development reflected in the domain or constructs of the test, and linguistic codes and conventions of the test (Luke et al., 2002).

In this context of major assessment and curriculum reform, policy and research to support and manage issues of equity, are helpful to up-skill teachers in inclusive and ethical assessment practice. Positive support of cultural and social diversity in policy, practice and principles is required. A fairer educational and assessment environment supports teachers to develop a sense of social, legal and ethical responsibility to promote equity. Alan Reid (2011) raised the important point in this changing educational context that equity as a concept and a practice must be theorised to have an impact on policy.

Access Issues and Literacy Demands

All assessment makes **demands on students' literacy**. Literate practices are often invisible as they are context-specific and constructed through social interactions. Assessment tasks are dense with literacy demands; teachers often do not see them or assume that these skills have been developed at another time in another context. The demands vary from student to student and it is difficult to say what these demands are, until teachers have what Reid (2001) calls, insights into students' extra-textual knowledge.

Failure to explicitly teach the **literacy demands of assessment** will seriously inhibit students' reported learning because of their inability to access what is being asked of them in the assessment item or task. Students may 'fail' or may not submit in the case of school-based assessment because they are uncertain or do not understand the assessment question or requirements of the assessment task. In other words, some students cannot access the literacy demands, which have been named by Hipwell & Klenowski (2011) as the **silent assessors**. Literacy and illiteracy are manifest when situations allow or disallow literate practices to be used. If students are placed in a situation where their literacy skills do not match the demands of that situation then they can be positioned as failures (McDermott, 1999; Stobart, 2008).

The prominence of large-scale testing for accountability purposes in Australia has heightened the need for teachers in their classroom assessment practices to be aware and skilled to understand and teach the literacy demands for both tests and assessment tasks. Ensuring that all students can understand and access the test question or assessment task is fundamental in addressing equity concerns (Hipwell & Klenowski, 2011). Findings from recent research conducted in Queensland, Australia emphasise the significance of this problem as it links to culture and assessment.

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Australian Research

Patterns of under-achievement by Indigenous students are reflected in national benchmark databases such as NAPLAN and international testing programs like TIMSS and PISA. A trend of underperformance in terms of equity has continued over the past six years as is evident from the comparative analyses of PISA results, first administered in 2000, then again in 2003, 2006 and 2009. However, too often little attention is given to better performances by Indigenous students and to the similarity of spread across percentiles for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. On this, De Bortoli and Thomson (2009) state:

Although many Indigenous students performed at very low levels (in PISA), there were also some Indigenous students who performed very well ... there was a spread of 304 score points between the 5th and 95th percentile for Indigenous students. The spread of scores for non-Indigenous students between the 5th and 95th percentile was similar, at 310 score points ... On the mathematical literacy proficiency scale in PISA 2003, only a small proportion of Indigenous students achieved Level 5 or 6, while around one in five non-Indigenous students were performing at these levels. At the lower end of the

mathematical literacy scale, 43 per cent of Indigenous students did not achieve a proficiency of Level 2 compared to 14 per cent of non-Indigenous students (p. 26).

There is no denying that Indigenous children score significantly lower than non-Indigenous children and that the performance of Indigenous students declines in numeracy and literacy relative to that of the rest of the school population as the period of time spent at school increases. Classroom teaching and assessment, and the conditions and organisation of schools in which the performances of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students vary and fluctuate, have been the subject of recent research (Klenowski, Tobias, Funnell, Vance, & Kaesehagen, 2010). Reasons about how and why fluctuations might occur need to be contrasted against factors such as the students' language and their sociocultural and socioeconomic circumstances.

Language Study

McTaggart and Curro (2009), in a north Queensland participatory action research study by teachers in Northern Queensland, suggest that differences between home and school are a fundamental factor.

(T)here are many complex and interacting causes of the underachievement of Indigenous students ... a vast number of Indigenous Australian students are speaking at least one Indigenous language and no English when they are not in classrooms ... The languages used, orally only, by students in schoolyards, at home and in recreation may range from traditional languages, through clearly identifiable creoles, to several dialects, sometimes termed 'Aboriginal Englishes' which are similar to each other but locally specific. Students may use any or all of these, together, or separately, or intermittently with subconscious code-switching. Standard Australian English is almost never used. So, in schools, students are usually learning English as a second or third language (McTaggart and Curro, 2009, p. 6).

This study which was sponsored by the Queensland College of Teachers (<http://www.qct.edu.au>) aimed to determine how to prepare teachers with the skills required for teaching students when English is not their first language particularly in relation to pre-service teacher education and teacher professional development. The Cairns based Far North Queensland Indigenous Schooling Support Unit (ISSU) (<http://www.issu.com.au>) provided rich case material and helped in the selection of the teachers, principals and other participants for this study. Teacher participants were selected from a broad range of schools on the basis of at least five years of teaching experience and their work on English as Second Language (ESL) with ISSU staff with evident changes in practice and learning as a result of that experience. These criteria for selection were important as the researchers wanted to obtain 'before and after' thinking of the participants. The researchers focused on staff development designed to assist educators to improve their language awareness and to adopt the principles and strategies of Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) in the teaching and learning for Indigenous students.

A review of the literature raised the researchers' awareness of how the relevance of ESL for Indigenous learners was lost in the multiple discourses of "- cultural differences, behaviour management, morale, literacy, attendance, hearing, disability, traditional language

maintenance, socio-economic status and NAPLAN scores” (McTaggart and Curro 2009, p. 4). The action research perspective adopted was used to interpret the information collected from the participants, and the review of the research literature, to outline an approach to monitor and consolidate changes in educational practice. These researchers concluded that while there is an abundance of ideas about Indigenous education there are “few resources to support the use of ESL ... strategies readily available” (ibid). They found that many participants had commenced their teaching careers knowing very little about the needs of Indigenous students. While some had significant understanding about Indigenous culture, languages, the low achievement of Indigenous students and the many causes fundamentally these teachers had not been given any useful strategies. McTaggart and Curro (2009) emphasise how many Indigenous students are failing to achieve sufficient English proficiency to gain access to the curriculum. It follows from this, that many Indigenous students fail to access the literacy demands of the assessment tasks such as those items that make up PISA, TIMSS and NAPLAN tests. “Teachers are poorly prepared to solve the problem which is caused by unjustified assumptions made by system curriculum makers, not by the children themselves, or their families” (p. 6).

Language of Mathematics Study

Yet, facility with Standard Australian English (SAE) is assumed in the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Australian Curriculum, NAPLAN and state-based curricula. Students whose first language is not SAE require sensitive teaching and learning strategies to gain an understanding of how to communicate (mathematically and linguistically) in classrooms. *The Language of Maths* study (DEST, 2005), which was included in the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) Literacy and Numeracy in the Middle Years Cluster Project, (<http://education.qld.gov.au/literacy/docs/deewr-myp-final-report.pdf>) was also conducted in northern Queensland. This project involved 14 teachers and 260 Indigenous students from Year 1 through to Year 9, two rural/remote schools with one hundred per cent Indigenous students and three urban schools with a diverse student population. Four of the schools were Education Queensland State Schools and one was a Catholic Education Primary School.

Language difference was highlighted as a significant issue in assessing learner performance and achievement, negatively impacting on Indigenous students’ test performance.

The test items that required articulation of “thinking, processing, and reasoning by students were the items that the students experienced most difficulty with and ‘failed’, along with not understanding the test questions due to the complexity of language used”

(DEST, 2005, Appendix 5, p. 7).

The Language of Maths study adopted an action research approach, which was informed by a review of recent relevant research and data collected by the project

teachers about the students they teach. Teachers completed contextual analyses of their respective schools by answering questions related to their teaching and their professional learning aims. The data from the teachers was augmented by a comparative analysis of Indigenous student assessment data with state data of the standardized Numeracy tests. Language difference was highlighted as a significant issue in assessing learner performance and achievement, negatively impacting on Indigenous students' test performance. The test items that required articulation of "thinking, processing, and reasoning by students were the items that the students experienced most difficulty with and 'failed', along with not understanding the test questions due to the complexity of language used" (DEST, 2005, Appendix 5, p. 7).

Developing the students' use of the language of mathematics while recognizing and valuing the Indigenous language spoken at home by using the home language as a bridge to the language of school and wider society was identified as a priority for development. The action research program incorporated discovery tasks for students and teacher reflection followed with the need to focus on language. Teachers found that the "... students demonstrated that they may have the requisite knowledge and skills, but language can be a barrier to communicating knowledge" (DEST, 2005, Appendix 5, p. 8).

The teachers worked in collaboration with colleagues, a linguist, and maths mentor to develop a scaffolded support document to help them appreciate linguistic differences and how these differences can impact on the teaching and learning of maths. The approach adopted used these differences as productive resources to plan for and scaffold students' understandings and knowledge of the English language of maths and to develop effective ways to assess and report student achievements. Importantly it was recognized and emphasized that Indigenous students are not a homogeneous group at either the system or the school level. It was understood that "language, knowledge and experience varies from community to community, student to student and categorizing students and applying a generic approach is counterproductive" (DEST, 2005, Appendix 5, p. 10).

The project maths mentor helped the teachers to identify and explicitly teach language in relation to:

- Mathematical content language (eg 'average', 'multiply', 'compare', 'more', 'less')
- Topic language (eg 'round trip', 'leg of a journey')
- Grammar in which this language is connected and embedded (eg If... then...because)
- The language of the task (eg design a 'table', present your 'data' in 'columns')
- Procedural language (eg present, explain, describe, calculate) etc. (Davidson, 2005, p. 15)

In summary the main outcomes of this project included:

- The importance of incorporating and valuing the entering behaviours of students so that teachers do not make assumptions about content knowledge, learning and associated understandings. The use of discovery tasks as formative assessment to help inform planning, teaching, assessment and reporting.
- Quality assessment tasks need to be authentic and meaningful and to be engaging for students.
- Assessment needs to provide the opportunity for all students to demonstrate success which includes:
 - Explicit teaching of language and bridging from the shared language identified in discovery tasks to abstract and symbolic language of mathematics
 - Open ended tasks that encourage engagement and risk taking
 - Clear expectations of criteria and standards for students and teachers
 - Contexts that promote engagement and risk taking
 - Opportunities for oral language use and development must be provided so that students can demonstrate understandings (valuing home language and school language)
 - Ensuring validity of assessment.

Teachers are expected to meet curriculum outcomes and national testing expectations with the diverse range of students who make up their classes. However, as evident from studies such as these conducted for the Queensland College of Teachers in 2009 and for DEST in 2005, teachers are often unaware or not knowledgeable in how to address language and literacy related issues.

Culture Responsive Assessment

Teaching and assessment practices that are responsive to sociocultural contexts, and cultural and social difference, help to address questions of equity. Learning for *all* students occurs with greater responsiveness to cultural and social difference in classroom teaching and assessment. Care in how the achievement results are interpreted and presented is essential to see beyond the raw scores and to understand the related equity issues with no over-interpretation of students' results in terms of innate ability and limitations (Murphy, 2009). Assessment is integral to the teacher's repertoire of practice and provides an important lens to understand the learning needs of the students and to modify teaching accordingly.

The concepts of 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) help illustrate how one group (socio economic, cultural or gender) can be situated such that greater resilience, perseverance or competence than another is required to succeed. 'Cultural capital' can take the form of knowledge, skills, education or values, which can either give an individual an advantage or a disadvantage, or a higher or lower status in society. For example, if students have not developed certain skills, or have not had access to certain knowledge because of their background, gender or Indigeneity, then they are at a disadvantage when those skills, or that knowledge, are valued and assessed in high-stakes tests. Such examinations for selection purposes can favour those who have access to the

‘cultural capital’ that is considered of value. It is in this way that the dominant group is privileged. Bourdieu’s work illustrates how internal processes of schooling, including assessment for selection purposes and the attainment of formal qualifications, provide for the reproduction of the elite rather than being genuinely meritocratic. His work showed how such processes favoured bourgeois ‘cultural capital’ and experience such that working class students had to have more persistence and ability than those from a favoured background to reach the same level in the education system (Broadfoot, 1996). These insights have implications for our assessment systems and the need for ***culture responsive assessment***.

Mahuika, Berryman and Bishop, (2011) who have reviewed issues of culture and assessment in New Zealand, refer to the disparity that exists in their country between their highest and lowest achievers, which they indicate exists within rather than between schools. These researchers support teacher use of ***culture responsive pedagogies and assessment*** to meet the specific needs of their Māori students. They state that these students are “to be targeted by teachers through the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogies that include assessment practices”. They are not however suggesting that Māori or Indigenous students “are so different that they need some different, and as yet undiscovered, ‘recipe’ for addressing these differences” (Mahuika, Berryman and Bishop, 2011, p 185). Rather from a sociocultural view it becomes apparent that some teachers are unaware of how the education system supports the dominant group’s cultural values and beliefs. However, although teachers want the best for all of their students they continue to use teaching and assessment strategies that do not recognize the cultural variations of their Indigenous students and how these differences mediate the Indigenous students’ learning and assessment outcomes.

Internationally, an important understanding of cultural difference has occurred in that there has been a shift from a ***deficit view*** of the learner to a more considered view of how the school or the system can take responsibility for the development of culturally responsive models and quality teaching programmes that incorporate formative assessment (Ainscow, 2010; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Bishop, O’Sullivan, & Berryman, 2010; Mahuika, Berryman and Bishop, 2011). Too often teachers or principals will indicate that very little can be done to improve the achievement of Indigenous students with explanations for low achievement directed at the student, the student’s home circumstances or outside of school experiences. As expressed by Mahuika, Berryman and Bishop, (2011, p 189) in relation to the teachers of their review “... teachers pathologised Māori students’ lived experiences by explaining their lack of educational achievement in deficit terms as something within the child or the child’s home” with the consequence of “...the creation of negative and problematic relationships between teachers and Māori students; lowered teacher expectations of Māori students’ abilities; and a loss of an appreciation of how powerful agentic teachers can be in bringing about change in learning outcomes for students previously denied access to the benefits that education has to offer.” These authors emphasise how teachers who adopt this view tend to blame someone or something beyond their influence and in so doing suggest that they are unable to take responsibility for the outcomes of these influences.

Schools and teachers need to develop their capacity to identify ‘deficit views of difference’ (Ainscow, 2009) which position students as ‘lacking in something.’ These assumptions that relate to notions of deficit regarding difference are challenged from a sociocultural

perspective of learning and assessment that gives greater respect to the valuing of difference. A diagnostic and holistic view of the student's background, culture, language and demeanour, is seen as more beneficial for the teacher to gain a better understanding from their use of formative assessment to identify the student's learning needs. Assessment and pedagogy that is responsive to cultural variations and that helps to build supportive relationships between teachers and their students acknowledges that culture is central to learning. Indigenous students who are supported to draw on their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1992) or what they know, or their ways of sense making from their culture, gain in terms of classroom learning. Effortful teaching and assessment that is culture responsive and allows for different ways of knowing facilitates increased agency for Indigenous students. Culture inclusive assessment does not attempt to favour different cultural groups rather it is recognised that cultural differences can impact on performance, such as on standardised tests.

Implications for Practice

Culture responsive assessment implies that teachers are assessment literate with respect to their understanding of cultural and language differences. These teachers provide pedagogic support for students to access the literacy demands of assessment tasks or items. They have expertise in task design, and attend to the validity and fairness of assessment practices. Culture responsive assessment practice requires teachers to be fully aware of the needs of their students whose first language is not English and to use appropriate strategies. For example, each set of assessment and teaching tasks or instruments that are designed to assess a student's achievement in a subject should use:

- a range and balance of background contexts in which assessment items or tasks are presented;
- a range and balance of types of assessment tasks or instruments and modes of response, including a balance and range of visual and linguistic material; and
- involve a range and balance of conditions (ACACA, 1995, p. 1).

It is important to understand the student's understandings, dispositions, self-beliefs and acknowledge their personal view of the value of learning. The teacher's use of assessment formatively helps her to interact with the student in ways that facilitates the student to re-imagine a different identity as a successful learner through appropriate feedback and goal setting. Such formative assessment practice also helps to develop a relationship that is not dominating and encourages student agency.

To become members of the learning community, students need to decode the cultural relay of the language of the classroom and align their behaviour with the accepted norms of that classroom. This is not always possible for Indigenous students who may have different cultural and language experiences to those of the classroom. Achieving a sense of cultural awareness together with classroom teachers and Indigenous education aides (Aboriginal Education Workers) is a fundamental goal for pedagogical and assessment decisions and for gaining greater awareness of what individual students might be capable of and how they might best learn. A cultural responsive approach to assessment acknowledges the importance of identity and background, the central constituents of teacher assessment literacies. As much as literacy is an issue for the students in terms of the demands of

assessment and the curriculum, it is an issue for teachers in their efforts to align their teaching practices with the current curriculum and standards reform.

Conclusion

Teachers need to be aware of the accountability context within which they currently work. Their assessment and pedagogic practices are mediated by structures beyond their control such as national policy about what they are to assess, and how that is to be recorded and reported. However, teachers also need to be aware of the diverse nature of the learners in their classrooms and how culture and language mediate their students' learning and assessment. It is important that teachers do not see Indigenous students as a homogeneous group for much diversity exists in terms of Indigenous students' backgrounds and cultural influences.

The students' sociocultural circumstances need to be understood considered and valued by teachers and school leaders as students' attitudes to learning are directly affected by the value they place on the learning and the success that they believe they might have in reaching a satisfactory goal. From research and the reviews conducted to date, it appears that a majority of teachers have had limited professional development in relation to Indigenous cultural awareness, culture inclusive strategies, language issues and literacy demands of the assessments and tests. Effortful teaching and practices that encompass the complex nature of the classroom environment by assessing students via rich and challenging tasks and open-ended questions that are reflective of assessment as a social and cultural practice are indicative of a teacher's developing professionalism.

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