CHAPTER THREE

Aesthetics of the Beautiful

Ideologic Tensions in Contemporary Assessment

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Pedagogy is an uncertain art. Yet by its very nature, contemporary teaching and learning practice typically suggests that the expert teacher must come to know their student well enough to plan and predict for educational challenges that will expand and extend their thinking. In many countries, this process is underpinned by bureaucratic ideology that has persuasively developed an agenda for assessment as accountability for pedagogy. As a result assessment practice in these educational institutions is very public, highly accountable and heavily prescribed through curriculum documents that claim to encompass societal agendas. In some cases, such practices are even legislated. Assessment practice is now seen as integral to the pedagogical process since it is through assessment that the teacher purportedly comes to understand the learner; thus providing a rationale for the teaching approaches and strategies that are applied in order to progress learning. In this chronotopic location I suggest there is little room for uncertainty, since the quest to capture the "essence" of the learner and mould them towards societal goals is as much a political agenda of accountability as it is pedagogical.

In the midst of such ideologic landscapes, artistic modes of assessment jostle to take their place within the heteroglot. In early childhood education, *Reggio Emilia* in Italy, *Kei Tua o Te Pae* in New Zealand, and the *Mosaic approach* in the United Kingdom have led these shifts. Through such means, educationalists and theorists claim to capture a fuller representation of the learner through creative doc-

umentation as assessment (Drummond, 2003). In doing so, these approaches seek to overcome traditional strongholds of assessment that have benefitted some learners and not others due to their normative-based, monologic claims. This is especially true in sociocultural early childhood education practice where recognition of the subtle buds of learning, rather than outcomes, is central to the educative quest (Vygotsky, 1998).

Taken together, these initiatives foreground assessment as a matter of relationships, in which a holistic interpretation of the learner is sought through artistic means. Story-telling through written narrative is a key genre within this paradigm. Any form of assessment that seeks to highlight learning deficits or measure against developmental norms has no place in this landscape. Here there are only positive messages framed within this revisioned aesthetic, characterized by narrative and image. Bruner (1986) suggests that such an approach is starkly different to traditional epistemological searches for truth that generate "theory," since narrative is aligned to imagination, poetry, and prose. Narrative therefore has a fundamentally ontological basis because it seeks to explore connections, experience and meaning-making rather than generate evidence or proof. By its very nature, such an approach resists universal application or evaluation, since notions of validity are determined by the relevance of the narrative to those who matter most—that is, the learner who benefits from assessment practice that purports to promote "continuities and progressions" (Carr, 2009, p. 41).

In this aesthetic location, documented assessment is revered as artistic form. Produced in a variety of narrative genres that claim to capture "voice" (Boardman, 2007; Carr & Lee, 2005; Carr, 2009; Clark, 2007; Paley, 2001; Rinaldi, 2005), assessment in this discourse is strategically aligned to educational goals that purport to represent societal values. In this chapter I argue that despite best intentions, such portrayal—because it is lodged within accountability regimes that require certainty—is denied its counter-claims of representation in traversing "horizons" (Carr, 2009). As such, I suggest that contemporary assessment practice exemplifies Bakhtin's "aesthetics of the beautiful" (1968, p. 29) where representations that sit outside this domain have no legitimate place. Now veiled within narrative and imagery, these authoritative agendas maintain control and certainty as a monologic requirement for teachers who struggle to account for themselves and their profession while simultaneously representing learning as a creative and highly uncertain process. I contend that the ability for teachers to live out these claims is impaired by underpinning ideological tensions that seek to uphold certainty, knowledge and truth cloaked in narrative aesthetics. As a result, many teachers spend large amounts of time dutifully producing text-as-evidence as opposed to engaging in the kinds of pedagogical relationships with learners that underpin aesthetic approaches. The

teacher's capacity to make pedagogical choices is thus constrained by monologic assessment frameworks that render her little more than "the juggler, rooted to the spot, dealing with an overabundance of flying objects" (Neyland, 2010, p. 35) and fail to appreciate the interpretive artistry of the teacher or the agentic nature of learning.

Bakhtin's overarching theory of dialogism, in particular concepts of *aesthetics*, *authorship* (Bakhtin, 1981, 1990, 1993) and *carnivalesque* (Bakhtin, 1968), provide a means of encountering these tensions. Dialogic approaches to assessment demand that teachers, in relationship with learners, will encounter, confront, challenge, and perhaps even alter authorial strongholds that dictate what can be valued, by whom, and how this ought to be represented. Drawing inspiration from Rabelaisian writings, Bakhtin (1968) invokes a carnival era in medieval society in which bodies are free to explore and even oppose the "beautiful," embracing the "grotesque" as legitimate forms of experience in the lives of all human beings. Underpinned by dialogic principles, such a route invites teachers to immerse themselves fully in dialogues of uncertainty *with* their students and to generate truths that are less concerned with outcomes than an appreciation of other through polyphonic means.

In dialogic complexity, teachers have the opportunity to develop a fuller appreciation of the learner as *personality* in their own right—beyond societal aspirations. Attention is also paid to the ideologies that are encased within subjective assessment practice, since Bakhtin embraces the presence of authoritative as well as internally persuasive forces (Matusov, 2007). Hence, less exclusive attention is given to the teacher's dialectic role in leading the learner towards a shared appreciation of desirable goals and outcomes than to dialogic engagement with ideologies and their genesis so that the learner can fully participate in learning that responds to their reality. Here, artistry lies in the process of polyphonic art-making and its form-shaping potential for teacher *and* learner. Assessment practice, seen through dialogic eyes, pays attention to what the teacher, and significant others, bring to the experience as much as the learner themselves. The learner is concurrently recognized as active participant in the way they reveal themselves to the teacher. As such, assessment from a dialogic perspective is a moral process that rejects monologic approaches because it is imbued with the aesthetic reflexivity of the teacher, as author, who dares to recognize, embrace and be altered by difference; and "other," who is far from passive in this enterprise. Seen in this light, no single framework, or method, will suffice for the teacher who exercises professional judgment within dialogic realms.

Aotearoa New Zealand Early Childhood Education: A Case in Point

To illustrate my point, I draw specifically on the Aotearoa New Zealand experience although similar reforms are evident, with local variations, in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Neyland (2010) argues that "assessment" as a discreet educational concept has only been evident in New Zealand educational policy since the 1980s. Heralded as a means of progress by "economists, management theorists and legislators to apply scientific management theory to education [who] back this up by a regime of state power" (Neyland, 2010, p. 26), contemporary emphasis is placed on notions such as performance, progress, and outcomes for learning. Under this regime assessment can be viewed as a distinct and highly prominent feature of pedagogy for the purpose of examining and making explicit achievement for accountability. Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, and Reid (2009) argue that recent assessment reforms in New Zealand have deliberately sought to avoid policy practices such as England's "Key Stage Assessment" or the United States' "No Child Left Behind." They suggest that New Zealand's reforms have established an interpretive self-management model that affords individual schools a great deal of choice within broad parameters. The revised *National Assessment Strategy* (2009, cited in Absolum et al., 2009, p. 37) now advocates for "a balance between what is required of teachers and the freedom they are given to determine what their students need to make best progress." As such, the interpretations teachers make are viewed by many New Zealand educational experts as central to the maintenance of effective pedagogical practice and, by extrapolation, positive outcomes for learners in New Zealand society.

Despite such rhetoric New Zealand's self-management assessment model and the professional response of teachers is held to account through a monitoring agency—the Education Review Office (ERO). The national leadership of the Ministry of Education and its central governance role across New Zealand mean that all educational institutions are bound to the ministry's directives. ERO's role is to evaluate the effectiveness of educational practice in individual institutions based on national priorities—one of which is assessment. Absolum et al. highlight the differing interpretations ERO brings to its evaluations, which have resulted in many New Zealand schools "respond[ing] by adopting a compliance mentality" (2009, p. 12). ERO's (2007a) review of assessment practice in New Zealand primary and secondary schools reports that effective assessment was evident in little more than half the schools evaluated. This evaluation was based on assessment ideals that emphasize claims of certainty encased in notions of "assessment literacy" (p. 45). As such, ERO seeks regular reports of individual progress against national priorities, and reg-

ular goal setting that demonstrates this commitment. Recent policy shifts to *National Standards* suggests that accountability of this nature is now an even greater priority for literacy and numeracy goals in particular and is identified as a matter of urgency in contemporary New Zealand education that has potential to undermine assessment ideals (Gilmore et al., 2009).

Within this wider educational discourse, it is hardly surprising that assessment has also become a government priority for early childhood education. As part of a 10-year strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002), a large assessment project culminated in a series of documents and professional development funding to support teachers in making what was described as a "paradigm shift" in assessment. Led by Professor Margaret Carr, this shift was underpinned by dispositional theory (Carr & Claxton, 2002). It was an adaptation of Bronwen Cowie's (2000) emphasis on "notice, recognize, respond" and, latterly, "revisit" as an additional assessment entreaty (Carr, 2009). The approach, outlined in a series of Exemplars for the early childhood sector entitled *Kei Tua o Te Pae: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009a, and for those working within Kaupapa Maaori[1] ideology, 2009b), emphasized what could be made visible and ultimately promoted as valued learning. The identified purpose of assessment was to provide "a tool for social thinking and action" (Cowie & Carr, 2004, p. 95) in which participants were to be conscripted, constructed, and supported to take the child's learning to greater heights (Carr, 2009). With the introduction of "learning stories"—a specific narrative genre linking what could be noticed and recognized to five key dispositions, which were carefully aligned to the early childhood education curriculum, *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996)—a new assessment regime was borne.[2] Drummond (2003) attributes the success of this revised approach to assessment to the fact that was "not a wish-list, but a statutory requirement" (p. 185). Indeed, there is little doubt that the success of the early childhood Assessment Exemplars can be partially attributed to both political and social allegiances at the time, which sought to establish assessment practices that could respond to national priorities for young children as future citizens because their learning was explicitly documented and teacher practice accounted for accordingly.

Professional development and teacher training programs followed. Here the focus turned towards writing genres, encouraging teachers to construct beautiful narratives accompanied by photographs that focused on identified interests of the learner in relation to the curriculum framework. What the teacher noticed and recognized as valued learning in accord with these goals became the emphasis of the learning stories, and accompanying photographs provided evidence of these claims (Perkins, 2009). In effect, teachers were trained to uphold national priorities and goals through the allure of this aesthetic. Stories became highly profiled chronicles of the learner's progress that children, families, and teachers reportedly accessed and

contributed to daily. Research reports have reified this practice in New Zealand (see for example, Carr, Hatherly, Lee, & Ramsey, 2003; Carr & Rameka, 2005; Feltham, 2005; Gould & Pohio, 2006; Hatherly & Sands, 2002; Lee & Carr, 2006) and elsewhere (Anning & Edwards, 2006; Drummond, 2003; Wood & Attfield, 2005), suggesting that it is a more authentic way of approaching assessment whereby "educators are committing themselves to taking each child's learning seriously as a process, with its own life and living landmarks" (Drummond, 2003, p. 186).

Taking a sociocultural stance, *Kei Tua o Te Pae* emphasizes the importance of family involvement, which is upheld as integral to effective assessment. In accordance with recommendations of the Education Review Office (2007a, 2007b) and *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), Carr (2009) suggests that effective assessment must be informed by and of benefit to family and community—in keeping with the curriculum emphasis. Teachers are challenged to find ways of inviting families to become part of the dialogue that takes place around the narrative, and to provide evidence of this engagement for accountability purposes. A typical response for many services has been to devise learning story templates titled "Parent Voice" which purport to complement and, in some cases, foreground planning and implementation in the early childhood education setting alongside teacher perspectives on learning. The notion of "voice" is rampant in assessment documentation within this paradigm (White, 2009, in press) since it is argued that the presence of "multiple voices" in sociocultural assessment constitutes validity (Carr, 2009). It is noteworthy that, with the exception of *Te Whatu Pokeko* (Ministry of Education, 2009b), reified learning stories have persistently been constructed around five central dispositions that are neatly aligned to the curriculum strands of the government-endorsed early childhood curriculum. Hence, I argue that despite their promise of diversity, "voices" are typically manipulated to demonstrate teacher allegiance to a set of national goals that, in essence, represent monologic discourse unless they can be viewed dialogically.

Learning stories, then, do not sit in isolation. Their location chronologically is also considered in assessment activity of this nature. As Carr (2009) explains, "learning refers to learning well beyond the here and now, in not-yet-familiar contexts and supported by as-yet-unknown technologies" (p. 22) that are enshrined within *Kei Tua o Te Pae*'s metaphor of the horizon that seeks to move "beyond the self" (p. 20). However, despite its unknown quality and virtual endpoint, teachers are required to devise a "what next" action statement for learning. The Education Review Office (ERO) can therefore expect that teachers will report evidence of "progress" for each child. The public nature of reporting means that the assessment practice of the teacher, as evaluated by an external agency, becomes intimately connected to the perceived quality of the center since ERO reports make judgments

against aspects of assessment practice as one of several key criteria for evaluation. ERO's national evaluation of early childhood education assessment practice (Education Review Office, 2007b) suggests that, like their primary and secondary colleagues, many early childhood teachers are struggling to meet assessment demands in New Zealand. According to ERO, pivotal to effective early childhood education assessment practice is "a willingness to see and value learning in different ways and to take risks in their professional discussions with other educators" (Education Review Office, 2007b, p. 41), yet ERO's evaluation criteria and reporting practices heavily prescribe the role of the teacher as documenting "the progress of each child as they develop competence and confidence over time" (p. 24). Taken together I argue that these two directives—one inviting uncertainty and the other demanding accountability—constitute an ideologic conflict for reviewers and teachers alike.

An Uneasy Alliance

Such a beautiful package with good intentions, socially and politically aligned ideals, neatly linked to a loved curriculum and internationally acclaimed seems the answer to an assessment prayer. Indeed, at the time of writing, learning stories remain the privileged form of assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education practice—with curriculum goals and priorities extending to the new entrant classroom. Despite this confident stance, there lurks an uneasy disquiet about the unnatural alliance between assessment as both narrative story-telling to celebrate learning and evidence of progression for accountability purposes. This alliance sits oddly within a pedagogical landscape in which the outcomes of assessment play such a vital role in predicting student success and teacher competence. Here, misguided notions of validity and reliability, based on positivist models of certainty, seek to confront the very ethos of narrative methodology (see, for example, the perilous critique of Blaiklock, 2008). Farquhar (2008) highlights the incompatible nature of such disparate philosophical orientations at play in contemporary New Zealand early childhood education discourse (see also Cullen, 2001; Kingston & Wright, 2008; Nuttall, 2005), suggesting that narrative methodologies are compromised in this location.

The first empirical clues of this unnatural alliance emerged as part of Stuart, Aitken, Gould, and Meade's (2008) national report on assessment practice, where some teachers highlighted their struggles in producing learning stories. In particular, teachers of under 2-year-olds described specific challenges since, in order to notice and recognize learning, they had to interpret languages they did not neces-

sarily share as adults and make tentative, yet definitive, claims about learning that were, of necessity, little more than "hunch." Based on these provocations and my own experience with teachers in professional development, I developed a keen interest in finding out how a teacher actually could notice and recognize learning, how learning might be conceptualized by a teacher working with very young children, and what the implications of such recognition might be for the learner in this complex heteroglossic arena.

Working closely with a teacher, an 18-month-old (toddler) and her family in my doctoral study (White, 2009), I entered into the New Zealand early childhood education assessment landscape. In doing so I encountered some of the major challenges facing all three participants. The numerous struggles encountered by the family and toddler are beyond the scope of this chapter; suffice to say that the learning stories held little meaning for them, and even less for the toddler. Learning stories generated during this time were neither valued nor considered relevant to their goals for their child. As a result, there was little engagement with written assessment documentation, and even less opportunity for their contribution since, from the teacher's perspective, the family members were disengaged and uninterested. The fact that the family members were at the same time prepared to spend hours of their time in dialogue about their daughter's experience, as part of the wider study, suggests that their ambivalence was less indicative of a lack of interest in their child, but rather a discursive response to assessment practices that they did not value and could not speak back to.

For the teacher, learning stories represented a major exercise in accountability that caused a great deal of anxiety on her part. Despite the fact that she worked exclusively and obediently with learning stories as the preferred assessment genre of her center (and, indeed, profession), her ability to "perform" by crafting narratives that truly reflected the toddler was impaired by several factors. Included in these were the expectations of management to produce a set number of learning stories each month, based on an allocated group of children in the center that rotated between staff every three months. Monthly staff meetings presented an opportunity to share insights about each of these children and to contribute to the development of a center plan that would respond to the learning preferences teachers were able to notice and recognize as significant. In reality these meetings were largely consumed by administrative messages, interspersed by the Supervisor suggesting tentative links to the early childhood curriculum, which featured heavily in planning templates. Staff received frequent verbal and written reminders about their professional accountabilities and the importance of producing regular learning stories, which were subsequently filed and checked before appearing in individual children's portfolios several weeks later. The pressure to "produce" assessment documentation that would fulfill accountabilities was keenly felt by all.

During the four-month period I spent in the center, several hours of polyphonic video footage (for an explanation of this method, see White, 2010) was taken based on the everyday experience of the toddler. Video was shared with the teacher and parents on a weekly or fortnightly basis and each were invited to contribute their point-of-view about what could be noticed and recognized as significant during regular re-probing interviews. During these interviews I invited participants to share their insights about the toddler, based on what meaning the footage generated for them. Comprising many hours of dialogue, the teacher's language both concealed (through linguistic conventions such as retracting words, placing her hand over her mouth, or silent pauses) and revealed (in words or body language such as using her hands in pulling or transferring actions) the tensions she experienced as part of this interpretive quest. As a further opportunity to understand the teacher's wider assessment practice, I took cognizance of the documentation that she produced during this period as secondary genres. In doing so I noted a marked discrepancy between the rich dialogue that took place during video-stimulated re-probing interviews and the written assessment records that the teacher generated. When I raised this with her, she confessed that, in reality, her assessment documentation bore little relation to the child she had come to know:

> Teacher: Um . . . because you're on a . . . I hate to say it . . . you're on a tight timeframe . . . you see there's an opening where you can have a piece of paper on your lap or even interact . . . and at the same time you're doing all of this as well as writing what you think they're learning but what they're learning there . . . it comes at the end. . . . After you've written you try and put yourself back into that episode and then you write your copy out and then you're trying to pull out what you think the purpose of that learning was . . . often there's time that you're writing and you think "oh they're learning that here" . . . but sometimes it just doesn't gel . . . I don't know . . . but I don't feel is authentic enough to record. . . . I think I'll talk about such and such so sometimes I think I'm going back in time, I might not have been involved in that or it's a snippet . . . I often don't record those because I don't feel that they are authentic because . . . what if I'm seeing it wrong? [places hand over mouth] . . . I feel that . . . um . . . I could take the story line somewhere completely different. . . . You know . . . it's almost like making a story up for the sake of it because I need a learning story to go in my profile. [Teacher Interview 4]

For this teacher, as I suspect for many others like her, angst over the production and public consumption of assessment documentation consumed a disproportionate amount of her time—both during her work in the center with children, during her non-contact time each week and in the many hours she spent working on it at home outside of work hours. Not only did she struggle to "know" the toddler amidst the busy-ness of her day, but she did not see herself as being artful in the narrative genre and therefore spent inordinate periods of time and energy craft-

ing what she hoped were desirable documents to fulfill her external accountabilities. Her confessions, through dialogue, revealed her perception of herself as discursively fulfilling mandatory requirements by making claims about perceived learning rather than promoting the best interests of the toddler, since she did not know how to work within this genre, its allegiance to the curriculum, or associated regimes of accountability while simultaneously encountering the messy wonder of the toddler's "real" experience in the center.

The teacher described this phenomenon as "sweeping things under the carpet" (White, 2009, p. 156). What she meant by this was that, due to the high levels of accountability perceived by herself and center management, only those aspects of teaching and learning that would meet the approval of external agencies, most importantly ERO, were exposed in written form—for public consumption. Juxtaposed with an early childhood curriculum framework that adopts an all-encompassing approach to pedagogy, the teacher's attempt to masquerade reality epitomizes the uneasy alliance of narrative and evidence-based ideologies. Despite the intent of *Kei Tua o Te Pae*, the aesthetics of the narrative had been condemned to one of discursive composition rather than its intended purpose in promoting learning. Derrick, Gawn, and Ecclestone (2008) describe a similar phenomenon in tertiary teaching where the "letter of rule" takes precedence over the underlying "spirit" of formative assessment and limits potential insights. Seen in this light, assessment becomes a means through which the learner can be represented in line with desirable societal traits (in the case of early childhood education these are enshrined within key dispositions) rather than appreciated as a unique personality in their own right. Sampson (1993) suggests that such an outcome is inevitable in approaches characterized by power relationships and located in regimes of control that try to "fit" an individual into monologic moulds that seek to construct "a you designed to meet my needs and desires, a you that is serviceable for me" (p.4). For the teacher in my study, the mold in which she was cast did little to promote learning with the toddler or her own sense of professionalism.

A Dialogic Response?

To date, little critical attention is given to the aesthetic experience of assessment process or to those who write these "beautiful works"—namely, the teacher. For them, there are multiple tensions faced in working across disparate ideologies. For the teacher in my study, this meant, in essence, that her assessment practice lacked meaning for herself, the child and the child's parents since there was no inspiration for her beyond what she perceived as her professional accountabilities. The "real"

assessment, therefore, took place in moments throughout the day, during staff meeting verbal reports about each child's progress and the insights generated in our video-stimulated dialogue, which, together with her engagement with the child, impacted profoundly on the pedagogical relationship they shared. Drawing on Voloshinov's (1973) provocation (see also Cassirer, 1953), dialogic approaches to assessment suggest that meaning is generated when an electric circuit has been connected—where there is surprise, uncertainty, or inspiration. It is at this dialogic connection, I argue, that authentic assessment is located within contemporary pedagogy. Here, what can be noticed, recognized, and responded to ideally represents a spark that ignites between people, underpinned by a balance between internally persuasive and authoritative discourses, rather than any predetermined or universal claim that is evident when one discourse, or authority, dominates.

I invited the teacher to suspend her sole allegiance to authorial accountabilities to consider such a spark in her relationship with the toddler. In doing so I invoked a Bakhtinian notion of *aesthetics* which is described by Hirschkop (1999) as "a celebration of . . . 'aesthetic love' . . . the free and unmotivated (that is, disinterested) affirmation of the value of another" (p. 60). Bakhtin (1990) describes aesthetics as the opening up of boundaries that takes place when authoring occurs dialogically. As such, aesthetics is concerned with points of view (Holquist, 1990). For the teacher this meant confronting preconceived "categories" of interpretation to explore the *"visual surplus"* we each brought to the interpretive experience. Here we invoked our keenest observation—exploiting our biases through dialogue. Our quest was not to claim intersubjectivity as some kind of 'eureka moment' of truth but instead to encounter "flux of its disparate elements into meaning wholes" (Holquist, 1990, xxiv).

As Emerson (1997) explains, surplus is a necessary feature of interpretation and exists in the interface between aesthetics and ethics. Seen in this light, interpretation is only possible through paying close attention to spatial (that is, the body in action in the world) and temporal (that is, the social chronotype). In taking this stance we did not deny the irrefutable existence of assessment regimes and other theoretical legacies inherited from the teacher (or my own) 'professional training.' Instead we sought to acknowledge their influence on our ability to notice and recognize what we determined was important. A dialogic approach gave both the teacher and I, along with other participants in the study, permission to bring to the fore alternative points of wonder that might hold clues to meaning. In other words, we opened *ourselves* up for scrutiny as much as we sought to understand the learner "*from* the character, not *about* him or her" (Vice, 1997, p. 120) since we responded to the influence of ideology and power as well as personal values, beliefs, and knowledge(s) in our interpretive discussions. Subjectivities therefore became cen-

tral to practice and a position of uncertainty was accepted in which assessment was viewed ontologically as an act of understanding rather than as an epistemological truth.

A related consideration in dialogic assessment activity is concerned with the notion of *authorship*. Highly featured in Bakhtin's earliest writings (1990), authorship is considered as a moral and ethical act of bestowal, an intimacy of encounter described by Sullivan (2007) as a "duty of love" (p. 11) in appreciating personality. Against this notion, Brandist (2002) suggests that intersubjective relations, in themselves, do not constitute an aesthetic act. In order for this to occur, the author must additionally step outside of the act, in an outsider stance, to take an evaluative view that draws on their own ideological base. Bakhtin cautions the author to avoid extremes of excessive intimacy or outsidedness since they can result in either the author projecting themselves on the learner, or losing oneself completely in the process of the learner. In both cases consummation is an end point Bakhtin stresses should be avoided at all cost since when one is consumed, one is finalized, leaving no room for dialogic loopholes which provide a means of alteration and renewal. Such an entreaty was at the heart of our interpretations—leading us to challenge tendencies to professionalize our interpretations by invoking epistemological claims that sought to finalize meanings.

The teacher brought both extremes to assessment activity. Excessive outsidedness, characterized by finalizing conclusions based on generic child development knowledge, originated from her psychological legacies of observation and research paradigms of certainty, which had groomed her to believe that what she saw represented truth. As outsider, she was unable to reconcile the aesthetic approach of narrative since she believed she had to be able to demonstrate her claims for accountability purposes and present herself as professionally aloof. Her attention to intimacy was equally impaired due to her fears of privileging one child over another, spreading her time around, compromising what she considered to be the exclusive right to intimacy of the parent in the life of their child, and what she perceived as professional behavior that did not allow for cuddles or touching. This latter concern is especially poignant given the emotional and physical needs of the age group she was working with at the time.

> Teacher: . . . *I don't want to be the one who is always there.* I wouldn't want her to spend all her day with me, and so there have been occasions in the last week or so where I've been stand-offish but not to the extent that I ignore [laughs] and not that I am *meaning* to do it but it'll still be "hi [toddler]" and we'll be talking, but I'll still carry on with my thing so I don't catch her at a moment where she'll—she'll latch on [last three words said very quickly and accompanied by grabbing hand gesture] [Teacher Interview 3: 700–706]

Then, later in the same interview, the teacher contradicted herself:

> Teacher: . . . *to really know a child you've got to be in there* . . . and I find in my learning stories—I don't know what you think of them—but I find if I'm not in their space with them, along with them, I can't do them.
>
> Jayne: Really? . . . Because you're writing about something you've shared?
>
> Teacher: Yeah . . . and . . . um . . . it's quite hard . . . but yes I like to be in there with them . . . and I find that sometimes they don't want you in there—that's fine . . . but I still don't think you really know a child . . . I don't know if you understand that, Jayne. [Teacher Interview 3: 882–888]

In confronting these extremes, the teacher began to recognize and embrace the relationship between seeing "more" by invoking visual surplus and the nature of relationship she enjoyed with the child, even when she could not be present. She found herself becoming increasingly attuned to the toddler as a result of the time she had taken to get to know her through dialogic assessment activity. Moreover, she began to appreciate the provocations such intimacy created for her as a professional working with very young children, including the significance of her own body as a central part of the curriculum and underpinning moral principles she held that belied any declaration of complete knowing. Linell (2010) suggests that this "'soft side' of dialogism . . . implies treating the other, perhaps an infant . . . as a significant other with a mind, that is, with some sense-making ability" (p. 29). When the teacher adopted this approach, she spent more time with the toddler, noticed more, advocated on her behalf with other staff, who developed what the Supervisor described as a "deeper" appreciation of the toddler's personality. Hicks (2002) suggests that this element of compassion is a new pedagogy that is essential for the teacher to become fully engaged with the learner in a way that "is more fully rational because it is infused with the weight of feeling and value" (p. 150). This is an especially significant issue for early childhood education, since emotional well-being and attachment are now considered necessary for effective brain development (Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2010). If assessment practice fails to notice, recognize, and respond to such intimacy, then it has great potential to impact negatively on the long-term development of very young children in Education and Care contexts outside of the home.

A further outcry of this dialogic entreaty is embodied in Bakhtin's attention to *carnival*, seen as a genre of resistance to monologic endeavors. Bakhtin argues that in a Renaissance era, where beauty is viewed as a complete and finished product, there is no room for change and renewal. As such, rather than emphasizing knowing, being and doing (as is the case in *Kei Tua o Te Pae*), Bakhtin focuses on notions

of becoming. Entering into a state of carnivalesque, becoming is embraced. Here Billingsgate features of laughter, alternate forms of speech, abuse, imagery, and debasement are celebrated as parody, ambivalence, comedy, and debasement. In this place, all hierarchies are suspended and everyone is considered to be part of the scene rather than spectator. For this reason, carnival is not considered to be an object for investigation, rather a "feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal . . . hostile to all that was immortalized and complete" (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 10). A Rabelaisian approach presents the youngest child as the embodiment of carnivalesque—laughing and free—epitomized in Middle Ages peasant carnival rituals that took place prior to the Renaissance era. Language forms that are recognized in a carnivalesque consideration include laughter, intimacy, and "couillon" as oppositional extremes. In my study these were frequently evident in the toddler's acts, such as hitting and saying sorry in sequence, biting, or joyous bodily movements. Rameka (2009) discusses similar acts in Kaupapa Maaori assessment as important aspects of personality.

Carnivalesque held no place in the teacher's written assessment at the outset of the study. When unleashed through dialogic enterprise, however, many examples were discovered. Though discussed and celebrated as significant portals to understanding, they did not initially appear in written assessment documentation. The teacher explained: "I think [teachers] are quite happy to verbally discuss it but . . . we wouldn't want that on the books" [Teacher Interview 4: 617–619]. Over time, however, as these forms became more prevalent in the teacher's "noticing"' (and "recognizing" as legitimate forms of language), it became impossible to ignore the impact of these acts. This was felt both in terms of the way the teacher viewed the toddler, but also as important insights into the practice of the teacher herself as well as center practice. The following excerpt is derived from a narrative, written at night in bed, which the teacher tentatively shared with her colleagues in the staff room. The narrative reflects on a biting incident that occurred while the teacher was on one of her tea breaks. This episode records her return to the center:

> You look at me with remorse. I try to put on a stern look. [Another teacher] speaks to you about biting and allows you to leave the . . . area. I start to think about your behavior as last week you used your words when involved in a confrontation . . . and I was so proud. Was your behavior inevitable? Did I not read the signs properly? The unsettledness, the glint that was missing in your eyes and the rosiness of your cheeks? I assume you are feeling poorly. You are growing, so fast. Transitioning from a baby to a toddler and a child.
>
> Late in the afternoon I enjoy cuddles with you. You are very cuddly. We look into each other's eyes. You feel like a baby at this moment. You fixate on my mole. You touch my mole with your fingertips. You say "moolllee" accentuating the sound, which always

> cracks me up laughing. I reply "yes, that's my mole, it's still there." We have a little chuckle together. This is the [toddler] I know. The child who's learning lots and has tenacity. [June, 2008]

Of immediate note is the fact that this story does not offer any obvious summary regarding the toddler and her learning in terms of "what next" or links to dispositions—features of assessment that the center management deemed desirable to ERO. Instead it deals with the teacher's *uncertainty* and emphasizes a pedagogical relationship that is centered on the child's agency. For example the "look of remorse" and affectionate return to the teacher's facial mole, which she knows from prior interpretations and interactions is an important genre of intimacy for this toddler, highlights the teacher's attention to toddler acts as communication. The emphasis on biting, as an important genre which was previously interpreted as a deficit (hence unrecognized and hidden) language act that could not be recorded, now presents an opportunity. Meaning is derived from the teacher's past, present, and future knowledge of (and relationship with) the child in this context. As a result of this narrative, its meaning for the staff and the discussion it generated with parents, the center altered their behavior management practice. They sought to understand the experience of the toddler through authorship and deeply engage with her experience accordingly. Management altered their rosters and behavior management practice to facilitate better relationships with key staff and celebrated the toddler's subsequent acts as recognition and reconciliation. All of this meant that the toddler and her peers had the opportunity to spend more time in pedagogical relationship with teachers who sought to understand and appreciate them and with whom they opened themselves up for further authorship.

When the narrative was shared at the staff meeting later that month, mutual tears were shed regarding its validity within the center context. As a result of the dialogue that ensued, a decision was made by management to climb out of "a conformity box" [Supervisor comment at May staff meeting], offer staff the opportunity to disregard Learning Story templates, and trial what they described as "writing from the heart." By their own admission, this shift presented significant perceived risk in terms of accountabilities with ERO. As such, a caveat was imposed by management that narratives, though written in a more subjective and uncensored style, still needed to explicitly link to curriculum goals and strands in a summarized conclusion. Without this imposition, the risk was considered too great. In light of this perceived accountability, such narrative approaches were entertained as an addendum to processes that emphasized the privileged goals—since it seemed there could be no reconciliation between the two.

Because culturally and societally valued "knowledge" is prescribed within the curriculum domain and its associated emphasis on dispositions, it is unlikely that aesthetic approaches such as those emphasized in the teacher's story could ever be fully realized in official assessment practice despite their value in terms of the pedagogical relationship between teacher and toddler which lies at the heart of learning. Nevertheless, it did serve to create space for aesthetic expression, described by Farquhar (2008) as "keeping narratives at play" (p. 178), and therefore standing in opposition to standardized templates. More importantly, the narrative enabled staff to alter their own practice through reflexive interpretation of otherwise silenced acts. As Czarniawska (2004) explains, "The justice or injustice done to the original narrative depends on the attitude of the researcher and on the precautions he or she takes" (p. 61). Seen in this light, analysis of narratives of this nature have the potential to corrupt or enhance meaning and, in doing so, play a transformative role in assessment. The teacher bears enormous responsibility in this regard but management, policymakers, and ERO are also severely implicated, as I have been at pains to emphasize throughout this chapter.

The results of this study suggest that it is often in *not* knowing, but instead trying to aesthetically understand in dialogue with other, that pedagogical insights can be generated. In viewing assessment through dialogic eyes, it is possible to *see* the significance of voices in play, both in what can be portrayed and how it can be viewed as meaningful for the people involved rather than merely as an accountability requirement for those on the outside. The teacher's confessional dialogue suggests that for this to occur, some sort of passing away or surrendering took place, which, though painful, yields hope for more ethical and meaningful assessment practice. Contrasting assessment of this nature with her previous experiences, the teacher invoked her cultural knowledge of *Hura Kohatu*.[3] In this context she described aesthetic assessment as a poignant awakening that required heart and soul:

> . . . it's a bit of everything. It's something beautiful and something sad, you treasure that person more, it brings you all together and sometimes it's hard and sometimes there's a bit of sorrow there, sometimes a bit of anger. It's just a lot of things—it's a lot of things all mixed into one. It's special and it's beautiful and. . . . it's lots of things. [Teacher Interview 6: 488–492]

While this teacher has not resolved the tensions that she faces in contemporary assessment practice, these findings offer a very real expression of the heteroglossic complexity within education and care settings, and the constant paradoxes teachers face in contemporary assessment activity. These paradoxes, once exposed through dialogic activity, became opportunities to honestly and openly embrace the realities of teaching which distinguish mature human thought from a process of

writing beautiful stories based on an externally generated dispositional criterion. Hence, for narrative assessment practice to thrive aesthetically in education, it is necessary for the teacher to work dialogically with complexity, attempting to understand richly, rather than obediently seeking outcomes through isolated frameworks that ignore complexity.

Conclusion

For the teacher in this study, surrendering her allegiance to authorial strongholds lay in the painful shedding of narrow interpretations that limited her assessment to a discreet, vague, and perfunctory set of dispositions that claim pedagogical certainty. Adopting a dialogic stance, the teacher was released to *see* in ways that celebrate the authorial surplus she and others have to offer by striving for deeper, detailed understanding based on inside and outsider perspectives that embrace uncertainty. Moreover, the teacher was able to engage in pedagogical relationships that recognized her dialogic role in assessment, and the benefits of going beyond authoritative discourse that limit its potential. Bingham & Sidorkin (2001) liken this process to that "of a poet who must be willing to be surprised by the unpredictability of her art, the teacher must be ready to become conscious of the insidious workings of relational power" (p. 27)—All this while recognizing the learner's right to retain a loophole which surpasses finalization and the teacher's reflexive capacity to see beyond her own horizon within the discursive locale. Such is the nature of polyphony within dialogic endeavor which is less concerned with gaining knowledge about how to enact ministry-sanctioned frameworks than with taking the time to aesthetically linger with the learner. As Sampson (1993) suggests:

> To celebrate the other is not merely to find a place for her or him within a theoretical model. . . . celebrating the other is also to recognize the degree to which the dialogic turn is a genuinely revolutionary transformation in the relationships of power and privilege that still mark Western civilization. (pp. 15–16)

Seen in this light, dialogism offers a provocation for educators and policymakers to re-vision assessment practice as aesthetic authorship that takes place within a messy pedagogy of *not* knowing. In this location, there is room for healthy interplay of discourses which recognize carnivalesque loopholes as well as accountabilities to external bodies. Teachers are therefore encouraged to take a provocative stance that talks back to the discourses and the tensions they promote—demanding answerability that goes beyond accountability at local and national levels of educational practice. In return teachers can be free to notice and recognize the

communicative agency of every child in tandem with their own visual surplus—the "grotesque" as well as the "beautiful"—and to render both as central to understanding. Seen as a personality in dialogic interplay, the child thereby becomes co-author in her learning rather than an object for manipulation. As such there is potential to alter the contemporary location of assessment practice within authorial discourse and enable teachers to claim their professional, political, personal, and ethical voice(s) in pedagogical relationships that seek to bring value to the other. Such activity, though risky in regimes of accountability, ignites the spark of meaning that positions authentic assessment as pedagogical practice and reclaims its legitimate right to uncertainty, aesthetical appreciation and wonder.

Notes

1. Kaupapa Maaori refers to the specific cultural practices and beliefs of the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.
2. Fleer (2010) argues that core concepts in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, in comparison with other countries, are vague. She suggests that for teachers to enact this curriculum "a great deal of discipline knowledge about mathematics, technology, science, and language" (p. 58) would be required since it is largely implicit within the framework.
3. Hura Kohatu is a Maaori ritual that typically takes place 12 months after the death of a loved one. It is a time of remembrance, celebration, and release.

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