



DOI 10.1515/jped-2015-0014

JoP 6 (2): 71 – 86

Early childhood assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand: Critical perspectives and fresh openings

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Abstract: This paper engages with assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Te Whāriki*, the internationally recognized early childhood curriculum framework, lies at the root of contemporary narrative assessment practices, and the concept of learning stories. We outline historical and societal underpinnings of these practices, and elevate the essence of assessment through learning stories and their particular ontological and epistemological aims and purposes. The paper emphasizes early childhood teaching and learning as a complex relational, inter-subjective, material, moral and political practice. It adopts a critical lens and begins from the premise that early childhood teachers are in the best position to make decisions about teaching and learning in their localized, contextualized settings, with and for the children with whom they share it. We examine the notion of effectiveness and ‘what works’ in assessment, with an emphasis on the importance of allowing for uncertainty, and for the invisible elements in children’s learning. *Te Whāriki* and learning stories are positioned as strong underpinnings of culturally and morally open, rich and complex assessment, to be constantly renegotiated within each local context, in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

Key words: Assessment, early childhood, learning stories, curriculum, New Zealand.

“Early Warnings: Millions are being spent to recruit children for early learning, but there is alarm about the quality of education and growing social justice concerns” (Woulfe, 2014).

Aotearoa New Zealand has been internationally recognized in the past twenty-five years as a particular productive place/space of discourses on childhood and early childhood education. The early warning in the opening quote is the cover story of a 2014 article in the *NZ Listener* (Woulfe, 2014), highlighting recent concerns within Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education. While ostensibly referring to greater participation concerns, these concerns cut deeply within the sector and, within the scope of this paper, have critical ramifications on perceptions and practices of assessment in early childhood education. Views on assessment have undergone a strong shift beyond traditional observation techniques and the psychological gaze on child development, to a fresh approach to viewing and learning about children and their lives, development and capabilities. Rather than focusing on a particular truth, singular category of development, or outcome, early childhood assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand have more recently promoted opening up to possibilities of many truths, and to children's learning and abilities as often fluctuating and unpredictable. This focus sees children's lives and development as always entwined in intricately woven relational webs, with their peers, their physical surroundings, their teachers, families and wider communities. Such views on assessment arise within a strong history in early childhood education, and are crucially entangled in and affected by the greater contemporary discourses on childhood and the purpose and policies of education.

This paper explores a contemporary picture of assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education, and urges a simultaneously strong and cautious engagement with fresh openings in the current developments. It begins by setting the context, geographically far away from the international reach. The early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has been shaped by conceptual challenges, social and cultural diversity and the rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s. It has been punctuated by rapid policy development, a strong focus on a knowledge economy and committed women leaders who have tirelessly advocated for a strong philosophy and vision for the sector, and challenged the governing system (Duhn, 2010; Hannigan, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). The sector has been a place not only of strength, but also of tensions, that have both shaped and been shaped by local societal shifts as well as global policy organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and other global, political and economic partnerships. Assessment views and practices have not escaped the wider educational demands, and indeed are critical in demonstrating achievements and satisfactory adherence to

benchmarks, expectations and funding prerequisites. Views on assessment are a vital, but not undisputed, element in the distinctiveness of Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education, reflecting particular cultural and social histories and relationships. Such tensions and distinctiveness reflect the early warnings of the opening quote, and are our focus in the following discussion.

ECE assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand

Socially, culturally and politically, Aotearoa New Zealand is a complicated place/space of neoliberal and neo-colonial, diverse childhoods. Its early years settings reflect its society's histories, and various shifts from indigenous, through colonial, to free-market, contemporary neo-colonial and neoliberal realities. As has been extensively researched by May (1997, 2001, 2013) and others, these shifts have not been smooth, easy progressions, or equally felt by the diverse communities around the country. Rather, they have played out as complex localised stories of subjugation, dominance, and resistance. For early childhood education the majorsignificance of the last twenty-five years lies in the development of Aotearoa New Zealand's, and the world's, first bicultural early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996), as a framework to guide teaching and learning in licensed early years centres.

As argued elsewhere, *Te Whāriki* has been both a witness and a resistant force alongside Aotearoa New Zealand's societal, cultural and policy developments (Tesar, 2015). For scholars and teachers casting their gaze on this country, there is a certain fantasy and complexity of the 'old world' in the 'new lands', tensions between the easiness, seductiveness, simplicity and temporality of early years settings, and pedagogies that produce particular childhoods. These ideas have been explored in a number of studies, that have challenged and established Aotearoa New Zealand as a place where curriculum practices represent the continuous struggles of the neoliberal marketplace, are embedded in the quest for quality in early years settings, and drive recent debates about effective implementation of the curriculum. Indeed, Peter Moss takes a hopeful stance when he argues, that "New Zealand has, in short, understood the need to rethink as well as restructure early childhood education and care" (Moss, 2008, p. 5).

Te Whāriki has remained unchanged in its twenty years, within a society that is increasingly culturally and socially diverse (especially in urban settings). The shifts in the early childhood landscape and tensions with which

it is surrounded have raised contemporary concerns about its implementation as an effective bicultural curriculum framework in the contemporary context (Ministry of Education, 2014). Concerns with the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, directly implicate assessment, as a key pedagogical application of the curriculum framework. The Education Review Office emphasizes this, stating “[t]he principles and/or strands of *Te Whāriki* were often more explicit in assessment information and in displays in the physical environment than in planning and teaching practices” (Education Review Office, 2013, p. 9). Similarly connecting implementation of the curriculum framework with assessment, an OECD report in 2012, *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care New Zealand*, argues that New Zealand should consider strategies which include “‘curriculum’ as an integral part of assessment and evaluation” (OECD, 2012, p. 8).

Assessment in the spotlight

Assessment is once again in the spotlight. Elevated as a crucial area of attention, concerns about how assessment occurs, and for what purposes, become heightened, and exacerbate contested issues surrounding assessment. Assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand are guided by and align with the aspirational statement of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) for children to “to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (p. 9). Further they reflect and enact an understanding of curriculum as “the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (p. 10). The spotlight on assessment is not new, as we illustrate now, with a little local background.

Numerous theories and philosophies underpin views on assessment, and practices of assessment can be examined in a number of ways. Following the curriculum aspirations, it can be considered first of all as a tool to improve learning, to build upon prior knowledge, give feedback, as a formative process. It can also be considered as a method for illustrating the learning that has occurred, by documenting children’s achievements – usually in relation to certain expectations – as a summative form of assessment. Further, the purpose of assessment can be seen as a method for feeding into the teaching process, to improve the teaching itself, and to provoke a rethinking of pedagogies and a re-evaluation of teaching practices. *Te Whāriki* is very clear that in early childhood “[a]ssessment occurs minute

by minute as adults listen, watch, and interact with an individual child or with groups of children. These continuous observations provide the basis of information for more in-depth assessment and evaluation that is integral to making decisions on how best to meet children's needs" (MoE, 1996, p. 29). The curriculum framework statements provide a clear focus and a particular orientation towards the importance and practice of assessment in early years settings.

Wider conceptions of assessment can be seen as encompassed within, and also questioning and moving beyond, these curricular aspirations. Brown, Irwing and Keegan (2008), for example, state that assessment can be conceptualised in a number of ways, and through their study have grouped understandings of assessment into four broad categories. They argue that conceptions of assessment focus on a) the improvement of quality in teaching and learning; b) accountability for the use of resources in educational settings; c) learner accountability and the quality of what they are learning; and further, d) that assessment is irrelevant and does not work or provide any positive outcomes. The challenges within these ideas represent some of the discourses that contest the appropriateness and value of views on assessment that underpin the tensions surrounding what is and what is not relevant and meaningful assessment.

Traditional views

Traditionally, assessment in early childhood education was considered to be constructed and produced within a positivist and objective paradigm. Its focus and purpose was to discover the truth, by asking questions that allowed teachers to determine what a child is lacking and what needs to be improved, rather than what the child knows (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). Traditional assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally were founded on and continually searched for ideal models, theories and strategies that removed the teacher/observer from the situation, as an objective actor without influence on the child (Carr, 2001). In that sense, such assessment was aimed at making 'true', 'objective' rankings of results and knowledges, removing factors that might influence the variables and outcomes, and highlighting the child's abilities, skills, and areas for improvement. The outcomes of such assessment could then inform future interventions, and changes to the curriculum in the given areas identified for improvement. It could lead to discussions with parents, to examinations of the child's skills, and abilities and potential for learning.

Traditional forms of assessment focused on the teacher standing back and documenting, and highlighted the importance of remaining objective. Not to interfere and ‘contaminate’ the child’s performance was critical, as teachers were told to “record the facts and not your impressions” (Penrose, 1991, p. 17). These practices allowed teachers to categorize and label, to perform checklists against particular scales and milestones, to decide what a child should know, be able to do, or should be, according to his or her age or developmental stage. They focused on the visible. This meant that what was invisible remained unnoticed and unrecorded, and that feelings, ideas and teacher/observer interpretations did not find their way into such records. This history of objective early childhood education assessment is the background not only of contemporary assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, but also of the strong resistance against standardised, measurable achievement standards in the early years.

Contemporary views

Contemporary early childhood assessment practices in Aotearoa New Zealand generally focus on documenting children’s learning and progress. As a participant in a recent study examining teacher’s views on their profession and their teaching practices stated, assessment is “teacher’s bread and butter”. It is, she said, “our business... to teach... and it is our business... to assess” (Farquhar & Tesar, 2016). Assessment, then, is an everyday reality in early years settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, and, as indicated in the opening to this paper, changing orientations towards assessment have affected the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood field. The move away from the traditional focus on objective recordings of a child’s development, to a holistically focused assessment of children’s learning, being and becoming, arose from the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996). Margaret Carr’s work has been seminal in this development, through her collaboration with colleagues in the development of the concept and practices of learning stories (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012).

Learning stories

Learning stories perform *Te Whāriki*’s framework and guiding principles. They posit assessment as localized and contextualised practices that can “prohibit, weaken, support or strengthen a curriculum” (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 108), and reject approaches to teaching, learning and assessment as “momentary and discontinuous, convergent...normative,easily measured” or “quantified” (Drummond, as cited in Lee, et al., 2013, p. 108).

Most importantly, learning stories recognize and allow for complexity, and as Mitchell (2008) emphasizes, “Learning Stories focus on dispositions that build identities that are positive about learning” (p. vii). Implemented in the wide range of early years settings that operate throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, and espoused and theorized through a 20-book resource, *Kei tua o te pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009), learning stories have become a crucial tool for implementing the holistic focus of *Te Whāriki*. They offer opportunities within Aotearoa New Zealand early years practices to respond to political and social concerns with the assessment of children’s learning within their local context. Learning stories as a method and practice of assessment have been well documented and outlined, most prominently in the *Kei tua o te pae* books of theories and exemplars, as well as from wider national (Mitchell, 2008) and international perspectives (Carr & Claxton, 2002; Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010). Carr and Lee (2012) stress the power of teacher research and inquiry in understanding “knowing and learning that goes beyond the local, informing the everyday practice in other places” (p. xii), reinforcing the power of assessment practices to both strengthen and constrain children’s learning.

The strength of the socio-cultural focus of the principles of *Te Whāriki* rise to the fore, through a process of noticing, recognizing and responding to children’s learning, through the socio-cultural lens of learning stories. They include factors such as promoting the inclusion of children’s own views on their learning, achievement or activities; cultural contexts and views on teaching and learning, including seeing children within a Māori context from a Māori perspective; as well as the influences of the wider learning community, with other people and things in the setting (Ministry of Education, 2004). That teachers’ lenses are shaped by their own histories, cultures and realities is recognized in the spaces that learning stories create, for diversity, interconnections between worlds and knowledges and the possibilities to share, negotiate, revisit, develop and change meanings. In these assessments the observer/teacher is an integral participant in the learning/assessment, where the assessment is intended to “inform and form teaching responses” (p. 5) through shared engagements and input about children’s activities and identities – between children, teachers and families – throughout the assessment process. The holistic, strengths-based approach of learning stories encourages capturing the invisible, “[a]ttributes such as respect, curiosity, trust, reflection, a sense of belonging, confidence, independence, and responsibility” that “are extremely difficult to measure but are often observable in children’s responses and behaviours” (MoE, 1996, p. 30), recognising the importance of children’s identity and overall wellbe-

ing to their learning. Learning stories thus depend on a reciprocal, shared evaluation of learning and relationships between learners, teachers, things and experiences that emphasise the invisible, through the identification of dispositions (Carr, 2001).

In her work with Claxton, Carr (2010) recognises the contentious nature and localised diversities of the wider 'learning curriculum' in early years settings as critical to the integrity of assessment. Learning stories counter what Biesta (2010) calls a "spectator view of knowledge" (p. 495), and urge careful attention to specific engagements with narratives of children's learning, with particular attention to the "robustness, breadth and richness" (Claxton & Carr, 2010, p. 89) of children's learning dispositions and experiences. Learning stories' socio-cultural framing performs *Te Whāriki's* principles, by positing learning as "a *social event* where relationships play an important part, and the child has the advantage of *interacting* with more skilled and experienced adults (or older peers) that can support their learning" (Cooper, 2009, p. 32). In such interactions the meaning of the stories relies on teacher and child engagement, with the nature and value of their community and context; with what they contribute within their particular learning environment; and, most importantly, on teachers and children continuously re-negotiating their intentions, ideas and values, in terms of teaching and learning in the time, place and space of the situation. Learning stories thus make space for uncertainty, responding to Malaguzzi's (as cited in Edwards et al., 1998) cautioning, as "[i]t is important for pedagogy not to be the prisoner of too much certainty, but instead to be aware of both the relativity of its powers and the difficulties of translating its ideals into practice" (p. 58). Events, learning and relationships in early years settings, are thus recognised as constantly evolving, not only in themselves, but in relation to and as a result of relational engagements – including in assessment – of teachers, children, other actors and occurrences.

Narrating identities

Learner and teacher identities are integral to an analysis of learning, as they form, and are formed through, narrative assessment practices. Teachers and learners reciprocally make meaning with each other, of their relationships, with the people, places and things in the learning environment and beyond. Learning stories shape identities as complex and holistic by countering traditional, measurable observations of visible happenings, where "[t]he child is frequently reduced to separate and measurable categories, such as social development, intellectual development and motor

development”, and where “processes which are very complex and interrelated in everyday life are isolated from one another”, by “viewing them as intrinsically interrelated functions that all work together in the production of change” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 46). The provocations offered through child self assessments transgress simple teaching moments, creating powerful openings for children’s voices and stories as crucial contributions to connect everyday realities, meanings and histories to the curriculum. Reciprocity is enacted through the very suggestion that teachers learn from children, not through simple one-off situations, but by elevating the invisible, child foreignness and children’s underground cultures and meanings (Arndt & Tesar, 2014; Tesar & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015). Learning stories create spaces for the unseen, unknown and unknowable.

Children directing their own lives

Empowering children “to direct their own lives” (MoE, 1996, p. 40) is one of the overarching principles of *Te Whāriki*, raising a further concern about the formation of child identities and learning through assessment. From a children’s rights perspective, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations Human Rights, 1989) highlights children’s right to be involved in decisions and for their views about their lives to be given ‘due weight’. While assessments using learning stories should aim to incorporate children’s views, there is still much room for improvement.

Increased emphasis on children’s rights since Aotearoa New Zealand ratified the convention in 1993 has highlighted a disappointing lack of voice given to children as increasingly problematic. Studies reveal participation rights as the most frequently neglected of the three categories of rights, behind protection rights and provision rights (Foote, Ellis, & Gasson, 2013). In their own study of early childhood teachers’ practices, Foote, Ellis and Gasson comment that even though teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand claim to be committed to the convention, questions and concerns remain about how this commitment is performed. To acknowledge children’s participation rights, they argue, children’s voices should more actively be heard in early childhood environments, to shift them from being places for children, to being children’s places. By utilizing the spaces created in learning stories, for children’s voices, experiences and opinions to shape their learning environment and identity as a learner, teachers can respond to this concern in critically important ways. A continuing and strong focus and constant renegotiation of the purpose of assessment for learning, rather than purely

of learning, and for teaching and enhancing teaching/learning practices within the local context, is crucial.

Purpose and policy

From these brief insights, assessment through learning stories clearly has the potential to fulfill the call for rich and strong narratives of learning and teaching. At the same time it has the potential, as acknowledged by Carr above, to be contentious. It is arguably the most powerful policy tool in education, as it shapes views on and practices with children, identifying their strengths and areas for improvement, and evoking and allowing teachers to negotiate positive change in their teaching by developing their views of children, teaching and learning (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). As Carr (2001) cites Broadfoot, “not only can such assessment be used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, institutions and indeed whole systems of education, it can also be used as a powerful source of leverage to bring about change” (p. ix). Reflecting this possibility, the high aspirations and potential of assessment using learning stories have achieved strong support from within the field of early childhood education, as indicated above. Simultaneously there has also been some debate around this form of assessment.

Some questions have been raised in relation to learning stories as a method of assessment of young children’s learning. Blaiklock (2010) questions the lack of measurable evidence and objectivity in learning stories, and questions their effectiveness, validity and credibility. Affirming *Te Whāriki* as an ethical framework that elevates children’s rights and abilities to participate in their own learning, Smith (2013) welcomes such questions as “a useful challenge to us in the early childhood sector to engage in reasoned debate about the curriculum” (p. 1). She further emphasizes the highly contextual nature of early childhood education and therefore also assessment, and curriculum planning, and argues that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of curriculum decisions with empirical research. Smith supports Carr’s (2001) ideas that learning stories embrace the complexities of the unseen elements in learning and that they engage with the depth and interpretation of learning through opportunities to extend and deepen engagements and to develop ever more complex understandings, through revisiting previous and planning for future learning. Questions and concerns about methods of assessment thus offer important opportunities for constantly re-negotiating and reaffirming strong assessment beliefs and practices within the wider early childhood sector.

Recent events in the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood sector illustrate concerns with the expectations of the type of evidence that should be gained through assessment processes. The prevailing neoliberal, outcomes and market driven landscape (Mitchell, 2014; Whyte, 2015), appears to have led to a mismatch, between the high aspirations and ideals of learning stories as complex, relational engagements, and the actual practices occurring in early childhood settings. Along with the concerns on participation and quality, in the *NZ Listener* investigation cited in the opening quote (Woulfe, 2014), May (2013) laments a tragic backtracking on teacher qualification benchmarks and funding cuts. Recent government reports reveal further concerning gaps in these areas, (Education Review Office, 2013, 2015). These issues and concerns further reflect societal shifts and changes in, for example, the increased marketization of the sector (Mitchell, 2011; Press & Mitchell, 2014), impacts of increased immigration on early childhood settings (Arndt, 2014) and what Hannigan (2013) refers to as the ‘tightening noose’ of scientific, managerialist language and expectations. Very recent developments in the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood sector represent a renewed willingness by the government to address some of the impacts of the above concerns. The Ministry of Education convened an Advisory Group on Early Learning (Ministry of Education, 2015) to engage the sector in conversation on how some of these issues should be treated (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Where to from here?

The suggestions from the Ministry Advisory Group on Early Learning will form a critical foundation on which to base further arguments, for a renewed focus on time, processes and appreciation for relational and holistic assessment. They hold the potential to reinforce a focus on the unseen, as Moss (2006) also urges, to “address the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity” (p. 32). In bringing together this discussion, we follow the suggestion that developing strong arguments for increasingly nuanced, subjective research, such as that used for assessment purposes, is crucial. Biesta (2010) supports this stance and provides a framework for questioning the type of evidence-based practices as promoted in traditional assessment practices and in the critiques of learning stories as effective, valid and credible narrative assessments.

In an examination of the tensions inherent in evidence-based practice, and teaching as an evidence-based profession, Biesta (2010) highlights that such a focus is purely based on technical questions - questions about ‘what

works'. This risks such practices ignoring the need for critical inquiry into normative and political questions, in relation to cultural specificities, for example, or localised social, geographical or environmental contexts, and about what is educationally desirable, why, and for whom. Furthermore, the extent to which research, or teaching practice, raises such questions, and actively supports and encourages moving beyond simplistic questions about 'what works,' holds the potential to address wider social justice concerns, by involving democratic thinking and assessment practices. An exclusive emphasis on 'what works,' following Biesta, only demonstrates what has worked in the past, and will most likely not work. This argument supports the narrative, subjective and, we argue, immensely powerful assessment practices that are possible through learning stories. It backs a re-commitment to openly recognising relationally complex and entangled teaching and learning as inspirational and informative. And it thus supports a reconnecting of *Te Whāriki's* principles and aspirations with contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural, educational and societal contexts.

So what is the ECE teachers' work?

What should be done, then, and is it time for change? Carr's (2004) arguments for effective assessment processes that depend on affirming complexity, connections and credibility are as critical and urgent now as ever. Deeply rooted in both the socio-cultural paradigm and the political and social uncertainties that underlie contemporary teaching and learning in early years settings, these notions counter a simplistic, linear approach to assessment and evidence. Resisting the push towards measurable evidence and truths, they embody a values-based approach (Biesta, 2010), and recognize that children and teachers in early years settings are "participants in an ever-evolving universe" (p. 495). In particular, they affirm children's pasts, presents and futures in ways that surpass the very conception of assessment and planning on the basis of 'objective' 'factual' recordings of what might have occurred in a particular time, place and context that no longer exists.

Early childhood assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand sits on the cusp of multiple uncertainties. With the report from the Advisory Group on Early Learning fresh off the press, revisions of assessment practices and aspirations – with the potential to address some concerns raised in this paper – loom on the horizon. Recommendations from this advisory group of early childhood representatives, consisting of teachers, academics, and researchers from across the country and internationally, include suggestions for a re-engagement with *Te Whāriki*, to encompass contemporary social and

cultural shifts, values and knowledges (Ministry of Education, 2015). They demonstrate a commitment to 21st century societal and educational contexts, referencing culturally affirming positions such as increasing the focus on Pasifika perspectives, and raising the emphasis on Māori pedagogies and practices. Undeniably, references to 21st century learning are tinged also with possibilities of a renewed focus and tendency towards neoliberal ideals – those managerialist and evidence-based concerns discussed above. But perhaps they also open fresh possibilities for reconceptualising views on early childhood education and assessment practices, to fulfill the social justice and rights concerns that have recently been emphasized.

Concluding comments

Clearly, there is no easy answer. In this paper we have positioned early childhood assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand in light of both warnings and fresh opportunities, situating the sector at across roads. Opening up relational possibilities for dialogue across wider educational discourses has the potential to further elevate the strong collaborations and consultation that have marked the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand throughout the history of *Te Whāriki* and beyond. Understandings of complex, connected and credible assessment have connected the diverse early years settings in the sector in the past, and, “while there is alarm about the quality of education and growing social justice concerns”, to return to Woulfe’s (2014) earlier warnings, this might just be the new age in which to address them.

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