

Educators' Perspectives on Assessment: Tensions, Contradictions and Dilemmas

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Researchers and teachers have both vigorously pursued and violently condemned the search for an "objective measure" of reading ability since at least the early part of this century (Johnston, 1984, 1988; Resnick, 1982). That search has distracted us from understanding the subtle, yet profound influence of human consciousness and social conditions on both the procedures and artifacts of reading assessment (Johnston, 1984; Madaus, 1986; Shulman, 1986).

My research is about beliefs, values, and assumptions that have enjoyed "uncritical privileging" in reading assessment. It examines the orientations of seventeen educators, from teachers through Ministry of Education officials, and the circumstances that have helped shape the construction, administration, and interpretation of reading assessments in the elementary public school system of British Columbia.

The sociological discipline of symbolic interactionism provides the construct of *perspective* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Janesick, 1977; Mead, 1934) to characterize "where" the educators in this study "stand and assess from." It uses the construct of a *negotiated order* (Hall, 1987; Strauss, 1978) to view the situated activity of these people and to study the social forces that helped shape their points of view. I wish better to understand the dynamic nature of assessment as a social-psychological phenomenon.

QUESTIONS

The following questions guided analysis and defined the limits of the study:

1. What beliefs, values, and actions constitute the various perspectives toward reading assessment?
2. Are there commonly held perspectives, or common elements of different perspectives?
3. What are the forces, both inter- and intrapersonal, that shape the perspectives held?

4. Is there a historical precedent for the various perspectives, their elements, and the forces that shape them?

METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study worked in elementary schools, district offices, and the Ministry of Education; they included teachers, principals, supervisory personnel, school board members, and Ministry officials. Each of the seventeen participants was interviewed between one and seven times, for a total of fifty-five interviews. Of these, forty-two were transcribed completely. These texts, as well as primary and secondary documents, were examined for the symbols people used; the norms, values, and imperatives they attended to; the assumptions they tacitly accepted; and the conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities they had to negotiate in carrying out their responsibilities in assessing students in an institutional setting.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

I present here general themes running through the data, without accompanying quotes and extended explanations.

Preliminary analysis reveals that assessment as a social-psychological phenomenon is fraught with tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas that cannot be solved or eliminated simply through application of technical-rational thinking or scientific procedure.

THE MILIEU

In the social or macro-order, the forces affecting participants' perspectives were: constant change; uncertainty and ambiguity; the existence of multiple, often conflicting perspectives; prevalence of weak communication links between the various contexts of situated activity (classrooms, schools, and districts); and historically produced and embedded conventions for "doing" assessment.

At the macro-order level, there are few constraints on the pluralism inherent in education. There are a multiplicity of assessment frameworks; there is also a general lack of agreement about which criteria should be used to judge growth and ability in reading in the elementary school. Despite a common symbol system—that is, letter grades and standard phrases such as "working at [or above, or below] grade level"—and standardized reporting procedures, the meaning attached to these signs varies considerably between classrooms, schools, and districts.

The exception to this general state of affairs came at individual school sites, where ambiguity and discord were held at arm's length, and negotiation of "what counts" was tightly constrained by formulation of and adherence to assessment programs built around a core of standardized tests.

PERSPECTIVES EMBEDDED IN THE MILIEU

Three fundamental perspectives appear thus far in the data. The participants hold two, the population of students and parents having a direct stake in the products of assessment hold the other. The orientations stem from practitioners' beliefs about the nature of knowledge, the nature of individuals and their development, and the relationship between individuals and society.

By far the most pervasive and widely held perspective is the *rational-analytic*. Participants holding this view value impartiality, certainty (as "number"), scientific expertise, uniform procedure, and analysis that reduces complex social-psychological "wholes" into separate independent elements. Problems in assessment are problems of methodology. The answers lie in devising, implementing, and rigorously adhering to a set of procedures that will best serve the management of social affairs: allocating grades, classifying students, selecting them into groups, matching them with resources, or "fixing up" their deficiencies. The value of assessment derives from its utility in gathering and using information to make value-free decisions.

The less pervasive orientation, which is *intuitive-wholistic*, is largely in reaction to the rational-analytic. Persons having this perspective value their connection to their students. They believe their judgments' authority is based in this personal connection. They rely more on common sense, intuition, insight, and the ability to talk with, listen to, and observe children than on standardized procedure.

The third perspective, present among students and parents, has been termed *consumeristic* by Broadfoot (1984). Parents and students are less interested in assessment procedures than in *outcomes*. In this view, assessment provides the "hard currency" of the system: letter grades and their equivalents. Marks are like "capital": they are "earned," to be "saved" and used to "purchase" scarce but highly valued places in the social order. Value is placed on "finding out what counts," and then acting accordingly. Competition, independent achievement, and accumulation of private "wealth" are valued. Whereas the first orientation places value on method and precision, and the second a sense of community, the third presumes "possessive individualism" (McPherson, 1962).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS: DILEMMAS AND CONTRADICTIONS
EMBEDDED IN THE PERSPECTIVES

On the underside of these perspectives and social conditions are dilemmas and contradictions participants find to be inescapable aspects of assessment. Preliminary analysis of the transcripts revealed the following "tensions":

1. Teachers are expected to be accurate in their judgments of something unavailable for direct observation, and not yet fully understood.
2. They are consequently compelled to be clear, unbiased, and comprehensive in their description of a phenomenon that has yet to be adequately described, using a language laced with values and ambiguity.

3. They must write their judgments, and in doing so inadvertently fix and stabilize something known for its emergent, unstable nature.
4. They are expected to know the way in advance, when in essence they must “muddle through” and risk trial and error.
5. They are expected to be honest and forthright, but must not shake confidence or create self-fulfilling prophecies or false hope leading to surprise.
6. They must take personal responsibility for performances that are largely beyond their control, and for a history of collective activity to which they are not party.

This study is innovative in dealing not with available techniques or methods of assessment, but rather with what lies underneath or behind them. Inherent in such techniques are disparate and discordant perspectives that give rise to tensions and contradictions often overlooked in research on assessment. By conducting conversations with educationists immersed in problematic situations of assessment, this study has discovered unresolved tensions and contradictions that in past were thought resolveable through the invention and implementation of “new and improved” methods.

By taking these tensions and contradictions seriously as *unresolvable* features of the human phenomenon of assessment, this study makes possible a more realistic starting point for deliberations about the nature of assessment in the public school system. Possibilities for future research include investigating children’s investments in assessment, thereby perhaps striking a better balance between the powerful (those who conduct the assessments) and the powerless (those who are assessed) (Broadfoot, 1984).

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