

Chapter 18

Summative Literacy Assessments and How They Imagine Children: An International Comparison

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ABSTRACT

As an international team of scholars, we have individually and collectively encountered a range of summative and formative assessment practices. Some of these assessment practices have originated from other parts of the world as policy practices increasingly entail global borrowing. We open this chapter with two compelling views of childhood; one places the onus on leading, directing, and controlling children's learning; the other views learning as idiosyncratic, unpredictable, and stunningly contingent on each child's vision of the world. We then introduce readers to a summative assessment associated with three countries (Australia, South Africa, and the United States) to explore how the use of these assessments contributes to the proliferation of particular views of childhood. Finally, we discuss the use of three formative literacy assessments that have gained international attention and present alternative visions of childhood and literacy learning.

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INTRODUCTION

As scholars from Australia, South Africa, and the United States, we have individually and collectively encountered both summative and formative assessment practices over many years and in many contexts. Some of these assessment practices have global talons originating in other parts of the world as policy practices increasingly entail global policy borrowing. Others are local. Significantly, we are all employed by universities, teach in mid-sized or large urban areas, and engage with communities and schools where the dominant language is English. While each context brings its own set of challenges, policies and resources, we share a commitment to serving children who have been historically underserved by school education. We are particularly interested in how assessments position and treat children who have traditionally been denied access to quality equitable schooling.

As we weigh our concerns and consider the uses of literacy assessments, we propose what we describe as a childhood-literacy-theory nexus, a coming together of views about childhood, literacy, and learning theory that inform and guide how literacy is taught. Conceptions of childhood operating within this nexus include the degree to which childhood is treated as entailing identifiable, predictable, and universal trajectories of growth. Relevant conceptions of literacy reflect whether literacy is conceptualized as skills-based or meaning-based, as decoding or encoding. Finally, our nexus addresses whether learning theories focus on identifiable best practices that are understood as appropriate for all children, regardless of cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences or whether learning processes are conceptualized as socio-culturally and individually unique. These theoretical conceptions of learning have significant implications for teachers who can be treated as implementers of existing programs or experts who design instruction for children.

Across this nexus, we have become increasingly concerned about the flow and circulation of largescale summative literacy assessments; how different constructions of literacy and childhood are interwoven and how these different constructions inform these literacy assessments. Our argument is that these assessments have a limited approach to literacy, a narrow view of childhood and detrimental effects on children, teachers and early childhood education more generally. In this chapter, we explore dimensions of a childhood-literacy-theory nexus. We begin by examining the mutually constitutive nature of theories of early literacy and theories of childhood. Then we present three largescale summative assessments from three different international contexts, Australia, South Africa and the United States and their theories of literacy and childhood. Having examined what they achieve and in what ways they are problematic, we turn to formative approaches to assessment as an alternative.

Theories of Childhood, Early Literacy and Assessment

Two longstanding and compelling views of childhood present different nexical formations related to childhood, literacy, and theories. Both situate children as capable of learning and knowing; however, one places the onus on teachers to lead, direct, and control children's learning. According to this way of thinking, the goal of assessment is to measure and evaluate learning in relation to linear, and pre-determined learning progressions (Apple, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). When applied to literacy, this view highlights the mastery of specific and often isolated skills over time (Hammill & Swanson, 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; Wyse & Goswami, 2008; Wyse & Styles, 2007) and has been linked to neoliberal views of literacy education (Edmondson, 2001; Hibbert, Heydon, & Rich, 2008; Rogers, Mosley, & Folkes, 2009).

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