“The Report Card is Pretty Ugly”: Children’s Perspectives of Assessment

**J. Karen Reynolds
Sonya Corbin Dwyer**
University of Regina

Abstract

Teacher education research attention has focused on the professional development of teachers. What is often neglected in this landscape of research is students’ experiences with learning. This paper describes children’s perceptions of classroom assessment practices. We draw from Bourdieu’s (1990) theory of capital to interpret students’ comments regarding practices associated with tests, collaborative assessment and evaluation, and grades. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that various forms of capital (cultural, social, and symbolic) mediate human activity. Within this context, these assessment practices are means by which institutionalized cultural capital, in the form of high grades, are generated for exchange on competitive home and school markets.

Reflection on how social phenomena get defined as problems in need of explanation in the first place quickly reveals that there is no such thing as a problem without a person (or group of them) who have this problem: a problem is always a problem for someone or other. (Harding, 1987, p. 6)

Assessment is socially situated in unequal relations of power among people engaged in purposeful activity. A more democratic approach to assessment would involve more equitable relations of power among teachers, students, parents, administration, policy-makers, and researchers. Greater communication and collaboration within, and across, interest groups will facilitate common understandings regarding what counts as useful assessment policy and fair assessment practices. This article explores children’s

Karen Reynolds is an Assistant Professor of Professional Studies. Her research interests include social constructivism and the experience of marginalized people. Sonya Corbin Dwyer is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology. She teaches a course *Assessing Student Learning* to pre-service teachers. Both are with the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina.

perceptions of assessment practices in an attempt to further educators’ awareness of children’s needs.

This article is part of a larger study which examined the particular contexts for classroom practices associated with assessment and evaluation (Reynolds, 1997). Children were chosen as the topic for this paper because children are the closest to the phenomena and are the primary beneficiaries of any related costs and benefits. In this paper, they are represented and interpreted as subjects, not objects, through stories of their experience of assessment.

Assessment and evaluation involve different processes:

Assessment is the systematic process of gathering information about student learning, what they know, are able to do, and are trying to do. Evaluation (is) the process of making judgments and decisions based on the interpretation of evidence of student learning gathered throughout assessment. Evaluation might be done by the teacher or the student independently or in collaboration. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 21)

For the purposes of this paper, ‘assessment’ is used to include assessment and evaluation processes.

The Social Construction of Assessment

Before describing the study, it is important to discuss constructivism because the children, unlike the teacher, have never had any formal training in assessment. Yet, they had skills in this technical area. They saw criterion-referenced evaluation activities as occasions when their teacher involved them in setting performance criteria. From these activities, the children learned that they received higher marks when they understood how their teacher marked their work. Children also belong to a community of learners by learning with and from each other through observation and discussion of assessment practices. Children increased their access to high marks by negotiating performance criteria with their teacher. Within this context, they clarified their teacher’s interpretation of criteria, changed criteria, and even rejected her interpretations. So how did the children ‘obtain’ this knowledge? This question is seldom asked by educators or researchers. Why not?

Harding (1993) cautions researchers that some socially situated locations, such as people from socio-economically oppressed groups, are more

objective starting points for inquiry than others. Furthermore, researchers who examine policy from a privileged position, without interrogating the position itself, severely limit their access to critical understanding of issues and problems.

Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups...to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically advantaged one for generating knowledge....So one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know; some social situations - critically unexamined dominant ones - are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief. (Harding, 1993, p. 54 - 55)

Like Harding (1993), Gaskell (1988) sees a need for policy research that addresses concerns of groups that are under-represented or absent in political debate. Gaskell points out that issues are clarified and new questions generated for consideration in the political process when research begins from the standpoints of interest groups. She contends that democratic policy research explores issues from multiple and even conflicting standpoints:

Researchers can explore issues from many potentially conflicting points of view including that of the student, the parent, the teachers' federation, or the government agency, to mention only a few. It can clarify, legitimate, and expand the political agendas these groups start with instead of simply solving problems for them....One role of a controversial study is to highlight issues of concern to children and introduce them into the debate. (Gaskell, 1988, p. 413 - 414)

What does this have to do with assessment? Moss (1996) addresses assessment in terms of educational measurement. Within this context, she contends that collaborative inquiry has been absent from traditional measurement research. Moss adds that developers have traditionally created interpretations of assessment for the people who use them; a top-down approach to assessment that excludes people from constructing and even challenging interpretations that directly affect their lives.

Those who are assessed or who use the assessment information often have no ready access to reconstruct or challenge these characterizations that may have an impact on their lives (Moss, 1996, p. 24).

Darling-Hammond (1996), Gaskell (1988), Harding (1993), and Moss (1996) favour studies of how meaning is produced and received within and across contexts. Moss points out that interpretations of assessment policy and related practices have serious political consequences in terms of who speaks for whom, and whose interests are represented.

Delandshere and Petrosky (1994) paint a picture of evaluative judgements regarding student progress as discourse in terms of who has the power to decide what counts as knowledge. They propose that people’s interpretations of assessment information are shaped by values of a particular discourse regarding what counts as knowledge.

Moss (1996) suggests that interpretivist research traditions allow researchers to comprehend their own, and others’, constructed meaning within and across contexts in which meaning is created and received. Because interpretivist traditions assume that meaning is intersubjective, meaning must be understood from the standpoints of people affected. Moss explains that the course and form that interpretation takes will depend on the dynamics of a context.

Like Harding (1993) and Hawkesworth (1989), Moss (1996) argues that there are no uncontested bases for establishing knowledge claims. Interpretations mediate, and are mediated by, the politics of knowledge production in specific contexts. She points out that research traditions differ in the ways in which they address the limitations of scientific inquiry.

In this section, important questions regarding power and representation in relation to assessment-evaluation were raised. Moreover, issues associated with who has the power to define and legitimate what counts as knowledge in interpretations of assessment-evaluation, and whose interests are represented by interpretations of assessment-evaluation, are presented as the heart of the debate. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine children’s perspectives of classroom assessment.

Methods of Data Collection and Ongoing Analysis

Ethnographic techniques were used to collect and analyze information regarding children’s perspectives of classroom assessment practices. Specifically, information was gathered from students using formal and informal observations (the children’s involvement in classroom assessment activities), semi-structured

interviews (questions included their opinions of different types of assessment activities, and of marks and grades), and field-notes.

Data analysis involved content analysis and triangulation. Content analysis of the multiple sources identified recurring words, ideas, images, and themes. Data were triangulated along intersecting axes of method, time, and space. Constant comparative analysis and methodological triangulation corroborated multiple sources associated with themes and categories.

Participant-Observation

A collaborative approach framed the researcher's role as a participant-observer in the classroom. From past experiences as a teacher, it was assumed that credibility and establishing trust with the grade 5/6 students depended upon being useful in the classroom. It was decided that this would begin by marking students' assignments, preparing materials for science and art classes, and supervising computer and library classes. Remedial assistance was also provided to several grade six students who were experiencing difficulty with computation. To increase the researcher's perceived credibility, the researcher proposed an activity developed for teaching research skills with children (Reynolds, 1990). As a result, students' experiences with observations helped them to understand why the researcher occasionally observed and made notes during class time.

The Participants

The group of students whose parents gave consent for their participation included 11 female students and 13 male students in a grade 5/6 split classroom in an elementary school located in a middle class neighbourhood of a large urban centre. Each student was individually interviewed once. These interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. One hundred and two informal and formal observations took place over a six-month period. Ninety of these observations were informal, or reconstructed. Twelve of these observations were formal, or immediate.

Children's Perceptions

"The big picture isn't always the important picture" (David)

Students' interpretations of classroom assessment practices, and their reasons for holding such views, were explored. Students described how and why they

would change certain practices. Equally important were students' interpretations of how marks, structured written comments, and letter grades affected their intra- and inter-personal relationships.

Tests

Students in the study liked tests when they received high marks and did not like them when they received low marks. Children associated stress and anxiety with tests, whether or not they did well. For example, David (a pseudonym) described a test as "a big nerve-wracking thing" even when he knew that he would do well. For Jeremy, a test served the sole purpose of generating marks for conversion to letter grades. He personified tests by saying that a test made up a letter grade: "A test is you have to prove how good you are to get a letter grade. It is an important part of your grade, it makes up your grade." Bob thought that low test marks led to low letter grades. He explained "if you get bad marks on your tests that will reflect on your report card."

Students associated stress and anxiety with tests because they had limited prior knowledge of specific content. In contrast, they liked pre-tests because they knew what to study for a final test. Within this context, they had more control over an activity and received higher marks. Jeremy: "If you're really bad at it and then you take a pre-test and find out what you need to work on, then you correct it, and you could get it right on the test." Martin: "Pre-tests help me a lot because then I can find out what kind of stuff I will have to do, and what kind of stuff I don't have to do. So I can study that right thing and then I can do pretty well on it." Meghan said that she was frightened by test schedules that did not allow her sufficient time to study. "When the teacher says, 'Okay we're having a test on math,' it's just *shocking* and then you just get scared. Like when it's a test you think, 'Oh no, what if I get a bad mark and then it's recorded and everything.'"

Matt said that he did not receive good marks on tests because tests made him nervous. He described how he experienced memory loss, increased heart rate, and tremors: "I do badly on tests because I just get really nervous. When I'm doing my regular work I normally get perfect. It bothers me that when I'm doing tests I get ten wrong. Tests are not harder and they're not easier. They're just like regular work but I get nervous. I don't think I get nervous but I am."

R: What are some of the things you feel when you're nervous?

Matt: Boom, boom, boom! (says while hitting chest).

R: Your heart?

Matt: Yeah. My hands start to shake while I'm writing, my knees are shaking like a motor (makes sound of a motor). I'm just trying to be calm and I'm always like, 'Oh, what is this!' And I know it's like, '8+6, Oh-Oh-Oh! What is it! I can't remember! I can't remember! Oh, 14!' Finally, after that long!

Like Matt, Summer and Bob commented that they experienced memory loss before a test. Rick explained that he was nervous before tests because he might not be able to do the questions, and low test marks could result in poor letter grades on his report card.

David argued that teachers did not need to test him to determine what he knew. He thought that his daily work should be sufficient evidence of this. He pointed out that tests had limited value because they created stress, and did not necessarily reinforce important information and skills.

I don't think I should be tested. The work I've done should show it. It's necessary to be taught. It's not necessary to get worried about what you've been taught, and to quickly sweat a lot or just write a lot at about what you've been taught. No matter what, in twenty years I'll probably forget the things that aren't, won't, be important to me. So you remember what's important always and you don't remember what's not. So no matter what's on the test you're still only going to remember what you think you need to remember. You remember what you like, you remember what you need to know.

David saw test anxiety as an unnecessary expenditure of his energy.

Collaborative Assessment and Evaluation

Students liked activities that involved means for increasing their access to high grades. They learned that they received high grades when they understood how the teacher assessed and evaluated their work. Within this context, children improved their access to high grades by collaborating with the teacher and peers to identify and define assessment and evaluation criteria for an activity.

Negotiation strategies ranged from clarification of criteria to changing, and even rejecting, criteria.

Students focused primarily on evaluative criteria because they thought that this criteria generated grades and in particular, high grades. In the following excerpts, students explain why they liked activities involving collaborative assessment and evaluation.

Jeremy: If you cover every single one of those criteria you'll get a good mark.

Martin: I can find out what I need to do to get a higher mark.

Casey: If you see criteria before, you know what you're going to be marked on so you know what you have to work on.

Meghan: I like having the criteria saying what you need to do to get a 4 [the highest score].

Matt: You know what you have to do to get a certain mark.

Tricia: You know what you're getting marked on.

Meghan: You know what you need to get an A.

Oscar thought that even though criteria guided his learning, criteria also represented marks. He assumed that he would get a higher grade by adhering to assessment and evaluation criteria: "I know exactly what to do. Like if it says 'put some metaphors and similes in the story.' I'll put some in." Meghan pointed out that rigidly set criteria limited her learning. She explained that knowing grading criteria "improves on what they're telling you to do, but not does not improve on what else isn't in the criteria."

Grades

Through lived experience, children learned that high marks and grades could be exchanged for money, food and clothing, increased self-esteem, positive relationships with teachers and parents, membership in the peer group, and access to further education. Therefore, they wanted increased access to high marks and grades. In the following excerpts, Brett, Matt, Summer, and Buffy

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describe the exchange value of marks and grades in terms of educational and career opportunities.

Brett: I just know I need an education to do the things that I would like to do. I'd like to be maybe a marine biologist.

Matt: The report cards help to get you into a good university. That education will help you get a job, just like being an accountant or a lawyer.

Summer: When you want to go to like a good school or a university or something you have to have good marks to get into it. If you get good marks you get a good job when you grow up.

Buffy: The report card tells me the marks that I got and if I could try harder. So it tells me if I'm not doing well in school or if I am. Later on in life I might want to go into medicine, or I might want to go into acting and drama or sports.

While these children thought that good marks guaranteed access to good universities, which led to professional employment, students were also concerned with the power of letter grades in affecting relationships. Jeremy explained that letter grades influenced the degree of respect shown to children by teachers, parents, and peers: "If you get good marks then people take you more seriously and encourage you. They treat you with respect. If you got a D, everybody's going to say you could have done way better than that. If you got an A they say 'congratulations.'" R: "Who would treat you better?" J: "Teachers sometimes...friends and parents."

David commented that parents might label a child as capable or incapable based upon letter grades on a report card. Moreover, parents might become very upset with a child if s/he received low grades. David concluded that letter grades were potentially damaging to a child's self-esteem and relationships with parents: "If you don't get an A for your ability then your parents are going to think that you don't have an ability. They'll think you're doing terrible cause this is what you've gotten. They're very upset with you and that makes you feel terrible because you've worked so hard for what you've done." Greg commented that when he did well on his report card he was praised by his parents. Meghan, Martin, and Matt recalled that their parents rewarded high letter grades with food, clothing, CDs, and school supplies.

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Meghan: If I get a good report card they'll take me out to dinner, or this term my mom bought me shirt.

Martin: I am rewarded only if I get two or three A's. Then I get some useless stuff like pencils and erasers.

Matt: I know some people, they get a CD for every A they get. Every time I get an A I get to choose what kind of dinner we're going to have.

Rick (Gr.6) said that his parents told him he would be allowed to quit a privately funded math tutoring class he attended if he received straight As on his report card, with the exception of Physical Education. He recalled receiving \$50 for a report card of straight As when he was in grade 5. Rick said that he liked receiving rewards for letter grades depending on what he could get. Students knew that low letter grades brought few rewards. Summer explained that she did not receive a reward for her grade 6 report cards because she did not do well enough. She recalled the time in grade 5 when she received a C+ on her report card and her parents took her out for dinner. Summer commented that she no longer cared if her family did not celebrate her report card.

Martin described his feelings of isolation when he received a low letter grade: “I like letter grades but I don't like it when I get too low ones. I feel like the only person in the class who's not doing that well in that subject. It makes me feel like I'm all by myself down low and everybody else us up high.”

According to David, a student's relationship with a teacher often influenced the marks that s/he received: “If the teacher likes the student then the student's going to get better marks, but if the teacher doesn't like the student's style, just the student himself, then that's going to affect big time on the marks. If the teacher likes you, you might not get a better mark but you'll get a more deserving mark, might get a better mark. If the teacher doesn't like you, you'll probably get a less deserving mark. A teacher needs to like you if you want to do well.”

Several students explained that letter grades affected identity and self-esteem. Casey said that she learned more about herself with each report card: “The report card tells you what kind of person you are, and it also tells yourself who you are. It tells you more about yourself every time you get one.”

Matt demonstrated he was more independent in his self-perception although he felt the report card reflected teachers' perceptions of him as an individual: “The report card is actually the teacher's opinion of me but I have my opinion of me. I think I'm a pretty bright kid.”

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David was convinced that letter grades should neither guide his reasons for learning nor shape his identity:

You should tell you who you are and you should know who you are, not what the little letters on this little sheet of paper say. Those shouldn't say anything 'cause if I drew a shape that looks like an A rather than a shape that looks like an F, that's just a drawing, just a little thing on a sheet of paper. I think that the report card is pretty ugly. It's not one of my favourite pictures. I wouldn't buy it for a million dollars if it were in some museum. It's sort of a false goal. It should be to work well should be your goal, not getting As.

David argued against a view of education wherein learning was exchanged for grades and his identity.

The Assessment Landscape

Students also liked having opportunities to talk about their opinions and concerns. For some students it may have been the first time that their views had been taken seriously by an adult. Other students had dialogued with parents and adults from a very young age. One girl in grade 6 told me that she liked being able to talk about things that bothered her without fear of recrimination.

Children in the study were the objects of assessment and evaluation policy. They were the ones being graded, and they were very clear about this. Grades were key stakes in their lives. Students saw tests and activities involving collaborative assessment and evaluation as means by which grades were generated for exchange on competitive home and school markets. The system exists for students to 'trade' grades for peer group acceptance, approval, praise, prestige, money, clothing, food, and compact discs and so they did. They saw themselves not only in competition with peers for grades and identity, but also in competition with teachers' and parents' expectations regarding their achievement.

Grades as Capital

Bourdieu's (1986; 1990) concept of "capital" as a theoretical framework was used to examine the children's stories about their experiences with classroom assessment. Within this context, assessment and evaluation policies and practices represented purposeful activity situated within unequal relations of

power among students and teachers. Bourdieu is particularly interested in the forces that shape the means by which capital or power is produced, distributed, and exchanged in a field. Within this context, assessment practices generate institutionalised cultural capital in the forms of grades with high exchange value on home, educational, and employment markets.

Bourdieu (1990) explained that interconnections among people's actions and objectives can be understood by focusing on how people use 'artifacts' and conventions as a means to compete for capital or power in competitive fields. Various forms of capital mediate human activity. In the classroom, these students viewed 'marks' or grades as capital. So perhaps a leap can be made that for some people, capital becomes their motivation. They work toward producing one type of capital to exchange for another type.

Ambiguity and risk were also key components of the students' interpretations of classroom assessment and evaluation practices. Students focused on reducing ambiguity of evaluative criteria to lessen risk of failure. In this way, positive effects that ambiguity might have on learning were weakened.

When students learned that marks and grades were mediated by evaluative criteria, they wanted more control over criteria. Many students reasoned that by collaborating with the teacher and their classmates to set evaluative criteria, they increased their access to high grades. They knew what to do to get a high grade. It appeared that students' interests to exercise control over evaluative criteria were desires for control over the authority of assessment and evaluation practices to mediate access to achievement. It was not surprising that students wanted more control over criteria that affected quality of life.

Students' comments as interpreted by Bourdieu's theory of capital helped to illustrate that competitive school and home economies taught children to exchange their learning for grades, and even equate learning with grades. Students wanted high grades because they thought that high grades had high exchange value on reward markets. In this way, high grades were an important form of capital or currency.

This discussion of 'grades as capital' extends the concept of one of the functions of assessment being gatekeeping "in which assessment determines who is granted a privilege such as admission or graduation" (Nagy, 2000, p. 262). How does 'grades as capital' fit with equal opportunity, especially equal opportunity to learn? "Assessment practices and policies should be regularly reviewed with the goal of improving the learning environment through effective evaluation techniques" (Taylor, 2001, p. 4). A greater understanding of the purposes of assessment is needed to guide practice (Taylor), and not only the

purposes of assessment from the school district's point of view but the purposes from the children's perspectives.

Issues for Consideration

The biggest issue to consider is where 'grades' reflect student achievement. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this topic, the children's comments certainly illustrate that they do not feel they do. If they feel grades are 'artificial' because they are influenced by whether or not they are liked by the teacher, for example, what are the implications of these beliefs on their learning? How will educators better gather information needed to report on student achievement? It is important to consider the information needed by different parties, such as parents and teachers whose information needs are different (Roeber, 2002).

Assessment formats are another issue that was raised by the children. From their stories of the stress caused by tests, are these the most appropriate methods of gathering information? While more educators are using authentic assessment approaches, testing is still widely used (Roeber, 2002). At the very least, it appears that test-taking strategies (particularly relaxation methods) should be taught in the early grades.

From this examination of children's perspectives, it appears that most students wanted to maximize their access to success. From a young age, they learned that grades affected the quality of their lives in positive and negative ways. Not surprisingly, they sought to reduce negative consequences and increase positive effects. Within this context, it is recommended more collaborative case studies be conducted to further extend educators' awareness of what assessment approaches 'work' and what one 'hurt' from children's perspectives.

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