What is sociocultural assessment?
He aha te aromatawai ahurea pāpori?
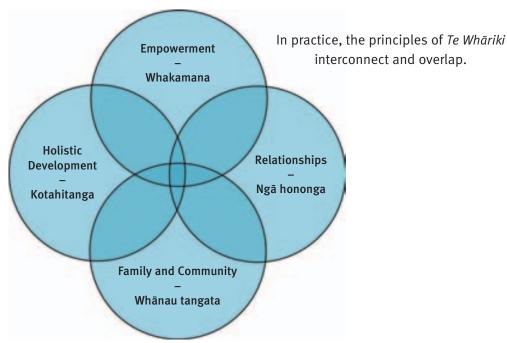
Introduction

The principles in *Te Whāriki* reflect a sociocultural approach to learning (see *Te Whāriki*, page 19). This approach is informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological-contextual model, which provides a framework for understanding the contexts in which humans develop. It is an approach that emphasises the importance of relationships and whanaungatanga.

Quality in Action: Te Mahi Whai Hua (pages 37–40) includes ideas about assessment practice that are consistent with the principles of *Te Whāriki*.

In practice, the principles of *Te Whāriki* interconnect and overlap.

Empowerment –
Whakamana

Holistic Development – Kotahitanga

Relationships – Ngā hononga

Family and Community – Whānau tangata

Empowerment   Whakamana

Feedback to children on their learning and development should enhance their sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners.

Te Whāriki, page 30

Sociocultural approaches to assessment:

- include the children's viewpoint when possible;
- take account of the powerful influence of assessments on children's sense of themselves as learners;
- ensure that assessments of children's learning within a Māori context are situated within a Māori pedagogical framework;
- recognise that assessment is one of the features of a learning community: it influences the quality of children's engagement in learning.

Caroline Gipps (2002) cites research that supports sociocultural perspectives on assessment in schools (perspectives that are equally applicable to early childhood settings). She writes that, from a sociocultural perspective, "assessment becomes a more collaborative enterprise, in which the pupil has some input" (page 77). She also states that assessment plays a key role in identity formation. "The language of assessment and evaluation is one of the routes by which the identity of young persons is formed ..." (page 80).

Research by Simone Shivan in a mainstream ECE centre in Waikato concluded that the empowerment of Māori families was associated with legitimation in the ECE centre of Māori knowledge, values, and language in ways that contributed positively to the children's sense of identity. She argues that empowerment is therefore much more complex than simply enabling parents to have a "voice". It involves an effective and sustaining partnership that is culturally and contextually specific (Biddulph et al., 2003, page 151).

Carole Ames (1992) describes the influence of assessment on the quality of children's engagement in learning:

> The ways in which students are evaluated [that is, assessed] is one of the most salient classroom factors that can affect student motivation … Students' perceptions of their ability appear to be especially responsive to social comparison information … Many students not only come to believe that they lack ability but this perception becomes shared among peers. This external evaluative pressure and emphasis on social comparison also appears to have negative consequences for children's interest, their pursuit of challenging tasks and their use of learning strategies … The learning strategies that are jeopardised are effort-based strategies that require deeper levels of information processing.

<div align="right">pages 264–265</div>

Holistic development   Kotahitanga

> Assessing or observing children should take place in the same contexts of meaningful activities and relationships that have provided the focus for the holistic curriculum … Assessment of children should encompass all dimensions of children's learning and development and should see the child as a whole.
>
> <div align="right">*Te Whāriki*, page 30</div>

Sociocultural approaches to assessment:

- construct "communities of learners";
- support the ongoing development of learning communities with a philosophy of whanaungatanga that values the contribution each individual brings to the collective process;
- keep the complexity of learning in mind and are particularly mindful of the context.

A number of researchers argue that curriculum (and assessment) practices should construct "communities of learners" (for example, Jerome Bruner, 1996, page 84 and Barbara Rogoff, 2003, page 361).

(Book 1 defines a "learning community" as "children, families, whānau, teachers, and beyond", fostering ongoing and diverse learning.)

Marilyn Fleer (2002) emphasises that what is lost in simple assessment measures is the "authenticity of complexity". She states that it is exactly "the complexity of teaching-learning contexts, with differing interaction patterns, historical contexts and dynamics specific to classrooms" that provides that authenticity (page 115).

The complexity of children's learning is increased where there are opportunities to participate in learning experiences that are authentic in the wider community.

Family and community   Whānau tangata

Families should be part of the assessment and evaluation of the curriculum as well as of children's learning and development.

Te Whāriki, page 30

Sociocultural approaches to assessment:

- reflect the interconnecting social and cultural worlds of children;
- recognise that a bicultural approach is necessary when assessing children's learning within bicultural and bilingual programmes;
- acknowledge multiple cultural lenses on assessment and learning.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological-contextual model is founded on the idea that all the social worlds of children and their families are intimately connected in a number of ways. Learning is enhanced when there are connections and relationships between early childhood settings away from home and other places and spaces in children's lives.

The developmental potential of a child rearing setting is increased as a function of the number of supportive links between that setting and other contexts involving the child or persons responsible for his or her care. Such interconnections may take the form of shared activities, two way communication, and information provided in each setting about the others.

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Reminding us of cultural perspectives, Lisa Delpit (1995) warns:

We all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making it seem that our own view is simply "the way it is".

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Lesieli I. Kupu MacIntyre (2001) highlights this point in a paper in which she offers a Pasifika perspective on assessment in early childhood education. She points out, for instance, that there is no one word in Tongan for the word "assessment". Instead there are three words – "sivi", "tesi", and "feʻauhi". When translated into English, these words become "examination", "test", and "competition".

Quality in Action: Te Mahi Whai Hua (page 57) points out that, for many Māori, the ways in which information is shared with whānau can be as important as the information itself.

Relationships   Ngā hononga

Assessment is influenced by the relationships between adults and children, just as children's learning and development are influenced by the relationships they form with others. This influence should be taken into consideration during all assessment practice.

Te Whāriki, page 30

Sociocultural approaches to assessment:

- are reciprocal and responsive: they can be shared, negotiated, revisited, and changed;
- are situated within the context of whanaungatanga;
- are about assessment for learning: they inform and form teaching responses.

Anne Smith (1999) explains:

Sociocultural perspectives emphasise that children's higher mental processes are formed through the scaffolding of children's developing understanding through social interactions with skilled partners. If children are to acquire knowledge about their world it is crucial that they engage in shared experiences with relevant scripts, events, and objects with adults (and peers).

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The "relevant scripts, events, and objects" Smith refers to include assessments.

Gipps (2002) argues for assessment opportunities and relationships that are based on power with, rather than power over, children. Rose Pere (1997) points out that assessment within a Māori context is closely linked to the teacher–child relationship. Teachers and learners working closely together are in the best position to jointly evaluate the ongoing process.

The exemplars are set out under the four principles in Te Whāriki. *For each principle, there is an illustrative, but not comprehensive, list of criteria to look for. However, each setting will develop its own criteria that reflect its unique context and community.*

Empowerment – Whakamana

Effective assessment practices enhance children's sense of themselves as capable and competent learners.

What to look for

- Assessments that refer to children setting their own goals
- Children developing their own criteria for assessing achievement
- Teachers' criteria for assessment that are transparent and accessible (and that may be negotiated by older children)
- Children being consulted about what they will do next
- Children being consulted about what will be recorded or collected.

Reflecting on our practice

- Discuss the occasions when, in our setting, assessments have referred to children setting their own goals. (For example, see "George gets to where he wants to be".)
- Have there been any occasions in our setting when children set a new goal because they were involved with an assessment? (For example, see "Aminiasi sets himself a goal".)
- How can children initiate or take a role in deciding what will be recorded or collected for their portfolio? (For example, see "Write about my moves!")
- What strategies within our programme enable teachers to document children's words? (For example, see "Those are the exact words I said, Mum!")
- What opportunities are there in our setting for children to revisit their assessments?