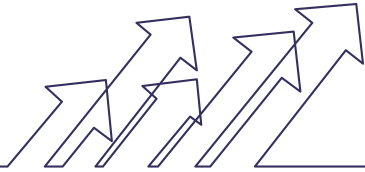# CHAPTER 1

Contexts for assessment and reporting

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to do the following.

LO 1.1   Identify the multiple purposes for assessment and the ways in which different aspects of assessment can be described.

LO 1.2   Identify major stakeholders in assessment and reporting and their needs for valid and reliable information.

LO 1.3   Analyse the multiple contexts that influence assessment and reporting.

ASSESSMENT IS THE PROCESS THAT MONITORS STUDENTS' *learning progress, and reporting makes the results available to a variety of audiences. These are key aspects of the school curriculum. In recent times they have received a great deal of emphasis from politicians, the business world and the community at large.*

Part of this interest has to do with the importance the community attaches to the outcomes of schooling, and part with the apparent mistrust of schools and teachers by the business community and sometimes the community at large. Schools are expected to produce graduates who can meet the multiple expectations that society has of the schooling process, and this goal is important not only to teachers but also to different stakeholders in the community. Some of the interest in assessment and reporting is a natural inclination on the part of parents to be better informed about the progress that their children are making in school. While assessment and reporting may originate as classroom processes between teachers and students, they are also public processes that are open to scrutiny and questioning. Social, political and economic contexts help to shape assessment and reporting policy which, in turn, influence practice. It is these broad contexts that are the subject of this chapter.
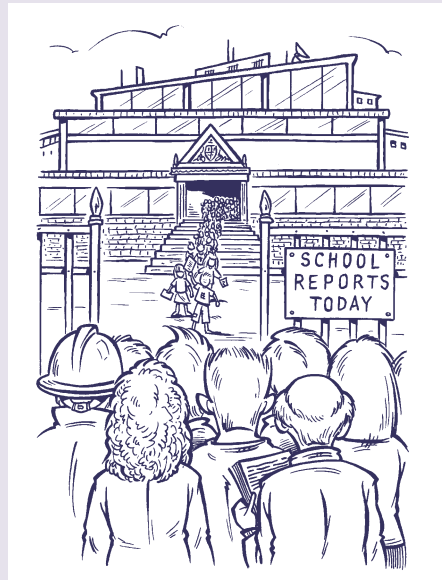
▶ The purposes of assessment and ways to talk about assessment processes

Assessment is a pervasive activity in society and can take a variety of forms. It can be carried out by professionals such as teachers, doctors, human resources consultants, psychologists, weather forecasters, wine tasters and music critics. Assessment requires professionals to make a judgment:

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LO 1.1

Identify the multiple purposes for assessment and the ways in which different aspects of assessment can be described.

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it might be a judgment a doctor makes about a patient's illness, having reviewed all the evidence, or an art critic's judgment about a new work of art. The purpose of these judgments, irrespective of context, is to provide an assessment—of the patient or the work of art, etc. Such assessments inform different audiences—the patient, the patient's family, or art lovers and artists. It can also provide the basis for further action, such as prescribing appropriate health care or identifying similar characteristics in other works of art. Professional judgments are made all the time across a great range of activities.

Assessment is not only the province of professionals; it is also an everyday activity. We make judgments about the quality of service we receive, the food we eat and the books we read. We select which movie to see based on the assessment of a film critic, we buy perfume after making an assessment of its fragrance, and we buy clothes based on an assessment of the extent to which they suit us. The criteria for these judgments are not always explicit and often vary from person to person, but in the course of a day we make many such judgments.

For teachers, however, assessment activities are more restricted. They are directly related to the school curriculum, to teaching and to what students learn. Such activities might be informal and take place in the classroom; for example, questions and answers, observations or judgments made about particular work samples. They might be more formal and include the marking of essays, teacher–devised tests or assessment of a portfolio of completed work. They might be very formal and include standardised tests, high–stakes examinations (e.g. the Higher School Certificate) or international surveys of student knowledge (e.g. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). Students are subjected to a broad range of assessment activities, and it will be useful at this point to review some of the terminology associated with assessment and reporting. This terminology is summarised in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Types and processes of assessment	
Norm-referenced assessment	Rank-orders the performance of individual students. This displays the range of performance and enables comparison of different levels of performance. The process can also involve comparing the performance of groups with similar or different characteristics (e.g. in terms of age, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status).
Criterion-referenced assessment	Shows how an individual student's performance compares with some predefined criterion or goal. Its function is to demonstrate what students know and are able to do; it does not seek to compare students.

Standards-based assessment	Uses criterion-referencing to show a student's performance in relation to expected levels of achievement at a specific grade level or stage of schooling.
Standardised test	A test that is developed, administered, scored and interpreted according to a common set of procedures. It is often used with large samples of students and may involve successive administrations over time. The results from different samples can be reliably compared. Such tests can be either norm-referenced or criterion-referenced.
Traditional assessment	Involves the use of paper-and-pencil tests that ask students to choose responses from alternative answers (e.g. multiple-choice questions, true/false questions, fill-in-the-blanks, matching exercises).
Alternative assessment	Students demonstrate their level of achievement by creating a response or a product (e.g. essay, painting, oral presentation, open-ended question, group projects).
Performance-based assessment	An alternative form of assessment that engages students in tasks and activities (e.g. role-play, debate, playing a musical instrument, contributing to group work, dramatic performance). Judgments are made through direct observation of performance.
Authentic assessment	Refers to the quality of assessment tasks and requires students to be engaged in 'real world' activities such as those they are likely to encounter as part of daily living. The focus is on the context of the task.
Portfolio assessment	An alternative form of assessment based on a collection of student work samples or products collected over time to demonstrate progress in learning. For such assessment, the purposes need to be clearly stated, the criteria for including work samples need to be articulated, and the criteria or standards for judging performance need to be agreed.
Formative assessment	Provides feedback to students about the progress they are making in learning new concepts, skills or attitudes. It can take place during the teaching/learning process or as structured feedback on work samples submitted by students. Such feedback can assist students to improve their learning and can also help teachers to develop new and more effective ways of teaching.
Summative assessment	Takes place at the end of a unit of work, a subject or a course, and indicates the extent to which expected learning outcomes have been achieved.
Reliability	Refers to the assessment's consistency and stability. The assessment result should be the same irrespective of when, where and how the assessment was taken, who marked it and when it was marked. The reliability of assessment can be enhanced when possible sources of error are minimised. Multiple assessment tasks, agreed assessment criteria, and the use of moderation procedures all help to ensure that assessment is consistent and therefore reliable.
Validity	The extent to which an assessment task accurately reflects the knowledge, skills and values being assessed. Tasks linked to curriculum objectives and outcome statements should have a high degree of validity. Such tasks, however, must also be fair to all students so that the content of the task does not favour one group of students over another.

The different types of assessment outlined in Table 1.1 highlight two key issues: first, assessment takes many different forms, and second, irrespective of the forms it takes, it needs to be reliable and valid. For teachers, classroom assessments such as tests, quizzes, essays, etc. all seek to understand the learning progress students are making on specific topics. They are a way of 'measuring' or 'describing' progress students are making—often against a set of learning outcomes or objectives. Teachers need this kind of information so that they can monitor their teaching; students need it so that they can identify their areas of strength and weakness and then plan what to do about these; and parents need it because they are always concerned about what their children are learning and the progress they are making. Teachers, parents and students have a common objective: they all want to ensure that students learn to their maximum capacity and to this end teachers will provide feedback directly to students to help them improve. At times teachers might also provide feedback to parents when there are opportunities for them to help their children (for example, by reading with them, by regularly checking homework or by providing time for extra tuition). Classroom assessments must be reliable and valid because they are designed to provide authentic results about students' learning progress and they must provide feedback so that students know what they need to do to progress and others—such as teachers and parents—know how to help them.

Assessment is also used for purposes other than directly supporting student learning. Examination and/or school-based assessments at the end of schooling are used to enable universities to decide who will be given a place and who will not. These assessment results are usually converted to cut-off scores and these scores determine who will be accepted into different university faculties. Within schools, the results of a teacher-made test might be used to group students into different ability classes or even different learning streams. This function of assessment is not so much about student learning as it is about ranking students' achievement for the purpose of making other decisions, such as university entrance and class composition. These, of course, are important decisions and they are often referred to as **high-stakes assessments** because the outcomes have very significant implications for students. For teachers, classroom assessment is often regarded as most important because it is something they control and can use to support students. Yet very often teachers also have responsibility for preparing students for examinations and it is hoped that classroom assessments along the way, with plenty of feedback provided by teachers, will help students to do well. Parents certainly want to see their children do well in examinations—they understand what is riding on results and how futures can be influenced by just a few ranks on a cut-off score.

High-stakes assessments such as end-of-school examinations are a reflection of the fact that such assessments are part of the social and political context of different societies. Other kinds of assessment also reflect these broader contexts. For example, Australia's **National Assessment Program (NAP)** uses subject assessments on a regular basis to gain some understanding of educational standards and whether different cohorts of students are meeting these standards. The well-known **National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)** is part of NAP. Thus the contexts that influence assessment play an important role in determining the kinds of assessment students will experience over a lifetime of schooling. The next section will focus on these contexts so that the following chapters on assessment practices and strategies can be better understood.

Check your understanding

1. Do you think classroom assessments are 'high-stakes' or 'low-stakes' assessment? How would you explain to parents the differences between these two aspects of assessment?
2. Why are assessment and reporting important to both the economy and the social purposes of schooling?

▶ Stakeholders and the outcomes of schooling

This section will examine the reasons different groups in society rely on assessment and reporting as either educational or social processes.

Everyone has a stake in the outcomes of schooling: students, parents, business and industry, governments and society. Collectively and individually, all of these groups feel the need to be aware of the progress that is being made in students' learning. Assessment is the means by which that learning can be monitored and improved, and reporting is the means by which **stakeholders** can be made aware of the progress that is being made. But why is there so much interest in the outcomes of schooling? Different groups have different answers to this question.

For *individual students*, what they learn during the schooling process will set them on their way for the future. It will not determine their future exclusively, as the education and training system is now constructed with multiple entry points. Yet there is now no doubt that post–school qualifications of some kind will be essential for young people if they are to have a satisfying and rewarding life. It is the school experience that provides the foundations for lifelong learning that will characterise society in the 21st century.

Parents take a natural interest in the progress being made by their children. They entrust their children to schools and teachers for the most formative years of their children's lives. They need to be informed on a regular basis how their children are progressing in the different areas of the school curriculum. Parents always want what is best for their children, and their influence on the learning process cannot be underestimated. Parents can be powerful supports for teachers in helping children to reach their potential.

The *owners of business and industry* take an unashamed interest in the extent to which young people leaving school can contribute directly to their economic activities. They are concerned with knowledge and skills that can be applied immediately to specific work requirements. Increasingly, business and industry have come to rely on a skilled workforce.

Governments have a responsibility towards all members of society, and it is natural that they should take an interest in what students are learning as a result of their school experiences. One reason is that expenditure on education represents a sizeable proportion of current–day budgets, so it is not unreasonable for governments to want to monitor that expenditure. Another reason is that governments have responsibility for the social and economic life of a nation, and the outcomes of schooling need to feed productively into those spheres.

LO 1.2

Identify major stakeholders in assessment and reporting and their needs for valid and reliable information.

Sample pages

Society as a whole takes an interest in the outcomes of schooling because young people are the citizens of the future. Society has constructed values around such things as democracy, the rule of law, particular forms of cultural expression, citizens' rights and responsibilities, the dignity of all human beings and the celebration of difference. These values can be at risk if young people leaving school are not aware of them. The continuation of our political and social systems, and indeed civil society itself, is dependent on an informed and active citizenry. For society as a whole, this is one of the most significant outcomes of schooling.

It is this backdrop that confronts teachers when it comes to assessment and reporting. The main features of these stakeholder interests are summarised in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2	Stakeholder interests in the outcomes of schooling
Stakeholder	**Interest**
Students	Life chances that are personally fulfilling and rewarding.
Parents	Success in all spheres of life and activity.
Business	Specific knowledge and skills to ensure the growth and development of the business and industry.
Government	Efficient and effective use of funds so as to achieve broad social and economic objectives.
Society	The development of future citizens who will recognise the ongoing need for values that support the basic institutions on which society has been built.

It should be clear from Table 1.2 that teachers may be confronted with a difficult task, as the stakeholder interests depicted are not always easily reconcilable. This may also help to explain why there are often criticisms of schools: different stakeholders have different expectations. External stakeholders are overwhelmingly instrumental in their approach to assessment: they need competent and effective workers. Teachers stand in a special relationship to assessment. In one sense they might be seen as the guardians of the educational function of assessment. This guardianship has the potential to bring them into conflict with external stakeholders. Nevertheless, they too can use assessment for instrumental purposes—for example in determining ability groups for subject selection. The main point here is that assessment provides the means by which the outcomes of schooling can be monitored by different groups. Thus assessment, and the way assessment results are reported, cannot help but be matters of public interest and concern.

Check your understanding

1. Which stakeholders do you think have the most legitimate interest in assessment and reporting?

► The contexts that influence assessment and reporting

Concern with the outcomes of schooling is deeply embedded in the social, economic and political contexts of the modern nation. The following sections will explore these contexts in some detail.

Economic contexts

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LO 1.3

Analyse the multiple contexts that influence assessment and reporting.

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There is little doubt that, in the 21st century, the concerns of the economy remain dominant in the community's thinking. Despite the apparent success of the Australian economy, the slightest movement in exchange rates or the current account deficit attracts media attention. Terms such as 'international competitiveness' still fall easily from the lips of Australian politicians, as they do from the lips of politicians throughout the world. Yet, this new century has brought different concerns from those of earlier centuries. **Globalisation** and technological innovation have been potent economic processes that have facilitated the development of free trade, the removal of trading barriers and the constant search for cheaper sources of labour. This has often resulted in significant economic advantages for some members of society but not for all. In many countries, including Australia, gaps between the rich and the poor have increased, resulting in inequalities and the development of groups in the community who often feel they have missed out on the benefits society has to offer.

Some writers have described the kind of society created by globalisation and its supporters as the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). It is an apt description and the 'risks' have multiplied beyond the originally defined environmental and economic risks. International terrorism that can strike anywhere, at any time, has introduced a level of personal and social uncertainty previously unknown. Environmental risks as reflected in the debates on climate change and global warming have intensified. The uncertainties created by so-called 'fake news' and disinformation create another level of risk when it becomes difficult to identify the truth in social and political discourse.

So, what does this have to do with assessment and reporting? The most immediate relationship between the impact of globalisation and assessment and reporting is that the latter are the tools by which society monitors the development of its skills and knowledge base. Assessment and reporting are able to inform society about the progress young people are making in school. Assessment provides some measure of that progress, and reporting makes that measure publicly available and capable of being contested. In an age where national economic development is integrally linked to an educated population, assessment and reporting provide indicators of how capable young people are of making a contribution to national growth and development. These are not the only purposes of assessment and reporting, as will be shown later. Yet, in terms of the economy and globalisation's challenges, this is the function they are able to perform. Such a function may well explain why governments internationally have taken an unprecedented interest in assessment issues in recent times (Brady & Kennedy, 2018).

While globalisation is a relatively recent economic process, the theoretical underpinnings that relate it to school education are not. Whether it is the industrial economy or the globalised economy, the function of schools has been seen traditionally as producing skilled labour. A crucial

function for schools has always been to provide the economy with workers and professionals who can contribute productively to economic activity. The requirements of those workers may well be different in a globalised economy that may well require generally higher levels of aggregate skills, but the general need remains. Assessment and reporting are the social mechanisms that indicate how well schools are performing this particular function.

In theoretical terms, this function has been underpinned by **human capital theory**. This theory had its roots in post–Second World War thinking about the factors that influence economic development. It was postulated that investment in education would have a rate of return such that, as the aggregate level of skills in a society grew, so would economic activity and development. The theory has a certain face validity, and there have been many empirical studies that have tried to demonstrate the relationship. Even though the empirical support for the theory is contested, policy makers in Australia have not been reluctant to express their belief in education's capacity to contribute to economic growth and development. Political parties on both sides of the political spectrum have endorsed this human capital view of education. Investment in education on the part of government, however, is a two-edged sword: it brings more funds, but it also brings greater scrutiny. It is for this reason that we now see NAPLAN and other NAP subject assessments (see Chapter 8 for further details on this issue). These assessments allow students' learning progress to be monitored on a regular basis and for reports to be made to students, their parents and the community. This is the price to be paid for further investment in schools and education.

Equity and social contexts

Governments of all persuasions have focused their attention on economic issues in recent times, and this is understandable given the vagaries of economic theory and economic development. Yet, schools are more than instruments of economic development: they also serve significant social purposes. These purposes were recognised in *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. Goal 1 signalled a commitment on the part of Australian governments to promoting equity and excellence in schooling. This involved, among other things, a commitment to:

- ensure that socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes
- reduce the effect of other sources of disadvantage, such as disability, homelessness, refugee status and remoteness
- ensure that schooling contributes to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity. (MCEETYA, 2008)

These goals, that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Agency (ACARA) continues to use for strategic planning purposes, are a clear statement about the importance of social purposes of schooling. Key issues for schooling are reducing the impact of disadvantage of different kinds, developing social cohesion and a respect for diversity in society. These are quite different from considering schools simply as a part of the economy that produces workers. Schools importantly assist in the development of citizens who have a role in electing governments, contributing to the development of a civil society and supporting the values that underpin a just and caring society. These are important social purposes to which schools contribute.

Another way to consider schools' social purposes is that they very often focus on providing young people with a set of agreed and common values designed to highlight a common humanity as well as to provide certainty in a fast-changing world. Assessment plays a fundamental role in relation to such social purposes: first, because it is important to monitor students' development in relation to desired attributes and values, but also because assessment practices have the potential to advantage some and disadvantage others. An important social purpose of schooling, therefore, is that assessment practices operate equitably for all individuals and groups. Otherwise, they will contribute to the general uncertainty that characterises our times and may lead to inequities in the educational system.

That there is a potential for assessment to operate inequitably is well documented in the literature. This has been recognised for some time. Berends and Koretz (1996), for example, reported that the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the United States seriously undervalued social context variables and hence underestimated the achievements of minority students. Here in Australia, it has become recognised that certain kinds of testing (e.g. multiple-choice tests) tend to favour boys over girls. It also appears that the kind of high-stakes testing used to select students for university entrance favours students from high socioeconomic areas over those from low socioeconomic areas. Inequities can also be seen when students whose first language is not English are required to take tests in English. Such students are at a disadvantage before they even start the test. These are not easy issues to address, but they alert us to the social issues that can have an impact on assessment practice.

Assessment can also point to inequities. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the case of Australia's Indigenous students. Gillan, Mellor and Krakouer (2017) have provided the most recent analyses of Indigenous students' educational achievements on standardised tests such NAPLAN but also on other NAP assessments and international tests. Irrespective of the assessment, Indigenous students do not perform well on these measures. Such results do not in any way begin to provide a solution: but they do point to an educational problem that requires a solution. These results may indicate problems with the assessment themselves, or they may indicate that the conditions of learning for Indigenous students are not supportive, or they may indicate both of these. What is important is that assessment results have helped to identify, or possibly confirm, that much more needs to be done to support Australia's Indigenous students.

What seems to be well accepted now is that assessment operates differentially in relation to different social groups. Thus the question teachers need to ask is whether the results they are getting based on different kinds of assessment practices are a true indicator of a student's learning, or whether they might be caused by some other factor such as race, gender, ethnicity or level of poverty. That is to say, assessment outcomes need to be subjected to a reality check. They do not 'speak for themselves' and they rarely speak unambiguously.

Assessment therefore has the potential to influence the social contexts of students in different ways. It can actually exacerbate social problems if assessment outcomes are interpreted outside the social contexts they inevitably influence. Thus, assessment has to be used with care and in such a way that unintended social outcomes are not created. On the other hand, assessment can alert us to potential social problems and inequities and provide the grounds on which specific action can be taken.

Accountability

There is little doubt that accountability has become one of the catchcries of our times. In educational circles, assessment has become one of the chief means by which governments have engaged in what can loosely be called 'processes of accountability'. Processes of accountability are related to student learning (what students know and are able to do), the expenditure of public funds, and aligning educational outcomes with the perceived needs of society and the economy. Teachers play a central role in accountability processes and are often held accountable for the broad outcomes of schooling. Thus, some understanding of how accountability mechanisms are developed and how they operate is important.

NAPLAN is a good example of assessment used for accountability purposes. Such testing provides a measure of the 'health' of education systems—and perhaps even of the efficiency of the politicians responsible for them! Education systems can pinpoint social groups, schools and regions that are not meeting predefined levels in basic skills, and appropriate action can then be taken. Such measures can also be fed back directly to parents so that they, too, can get some idea of how their children are performing in relation to accepted standards of performance. Teachers are able to gain information about their classes, and about individuals within their classes. That the measures are 'objective', that they have been used nationally and that they are made available to key stakeholders makes the process explicit and transparent. None of this offsets the potential pressure and stress NAPLAN might bring to student and teachers, but in the minds of policy makers NAPLAN serves broader purposes that will be discussed in later chapters.

It is fortunate that Australian education authorities have not gone as far as their counterparts in the United States and the United Kingdom, where such results are often published in the local newspapers. This additional type of 'media accountability' brings schools into the public gaze in an unfortunate way, and all sorts of conclusions are drawn about assessment outcomes. In particular, schools are often ranked according to the test scores of their students without regard for the social composition of the schools, their resource levels, or the broader cultural context in which they are operating. Such accountability is of an extreme kind, reflecting the lack of confidence that many communities have in their schools and teachers. It also reflects ignorance about the purpose and function of assessment.

Education system authorities have become increasingly concerned with developing and refining accountability mechanisms. In the government sector these authorities are answerable to the broader processes of government, especially when it comes to securing funds to finance educational expenditure. Often, they are dealing with Treasuries and Departments of Finance that recognise only one thing—the rate of return on expenditure. Student learning outcome measures can often be used to demonstrate that the education system is being monitored and that incremental gains are being made. Such reasons may not hold much educational sway, but in a tense environment concerned with resource allocation they may swing an argument. What is more, taxpayers are probably supportive of any mechanisms that seek to enhance the responsible allocation of their resources.

Another perspective on accountability can be seen in the effort that has gone into the development of the Australian Curriculum. The school curriculum has taken on such significance

with the expansion of schooling and more and more students completing upper secondary education. As indicated in the earlier section on the economic contexts of schooling, schools have taken on greater economic significance since graduates are the ones who must succeed in the labour market or in further education; hence the focus on student learning outcomes (what students should know and be able to do). In terms of the Australian Curriculum, learning outcomes are common for all students irrespective of where they are in the country. Thus the Australian Curriculum is in itself an accountability mechanism: it ensures a common base of learning for all Australian students. While there is some educational justification for such an approach, from the point of view of governments such consistency is all about accountability. What is more, teachers are held responsible in this accountability regime!

Some time ago, however, Linn (1998, p. 2) pointed out that, from a policy maker's perspective, assessment has a number of advantages as an accountability tool. It is relatively inexpensive (compared with, for example, raising teachers' salaries in order to attract high-quality graduates to the profession), it can be externally mandated and rapidly implemented, and results can be made highly visible. Yet we need to be aware that assessment in itself does not bring about improvement. What happens with assessment results is the important thing. This is why classroom assessment can be so powerful: it provides feedback directly to students who can use it to understand what they need to do to improve. Assessment for accountability is less direct and serves different purposes that might be described as public rather than private.

Personal fulfilment and satisfaction

Older, progressive notions of education saw its function primarily in terms of nurturing and developing individuals to their full capacity and making use of their complete range of talents. Of course, such views, when they were originally developed in the 18th century, applied to an elite group that was privileged enough to have access to education. Today, with mass education the norm, the emphasis on personal fulfilment as an outcome of education does not seem to rank very highly. Yet for individual students, and indeed for their parents, the personal dimension of education cannot be ignored.

Progressivist educators such as Smith and Goodwin (1997) caught some of this personal dimension when they refer to the need for assessment to be responsive to the needs of individual students. Perhaps more importantly, they see children as individuals whom they have to get to know on a daily basis. They recognise that the child they know one day may be different the next. In this context, assessment means being ever-alert to where children are, how they are responding to lessons and activities, and how they are or are not progressing. There is nothing scientific about this kind of assessment: it is based on developing a relationship with students, knowing who they are, and being interested in who they are to become. Student-centred assessment involves being in 'constant conversation with the children about the sense they are making of their work, what it is they are learning and doing' (Smith & Goodwin, 1997, p. 103).

Student-centred assessment has its theoretical origins in progressivist notions of education popularised by philosophers such as John Dewey. Today, such views have their advocates among constructivist educators—people who believe that children are able to construct their own

knowledge in meaningful ways. According to **constructivism**, children make meaning of the world around them and they do so in deliberate and purposeful ways. This meaning-making process may not always be consistent with the requirements of nationally developed curricula, but it is personal and responsive to the external environment. It is easy to see why advocates of student-centred assessment find recent developments in curriculum and assessment practice difficult to accept. The assumption that all children should reach a particular level of learning at the same time is quite repugnant to views that highlight individual growth and development. Yet, in the real world, teachers have to live with the external constraints imposed by education systems while pursuing their own personal views and practices. The resulting tension can be stressful for teachers and students alike.

Another perspective on the importance of the personal dimension to assessment comes from Genishi (1997), who focused on the challenge of the post-modern world. At its heart, post-modernism is about the reification of the individual rather than the group; the personal story rather than the grand narrative; the startlingly new rather than the taken-for-granted; the powerless rather than the powerful; and liberation from rather than adherence to tradition. Thus, Genishi drew on distinguished psychologists such as Bruner (1996) and Kelly (1991) to highlight the importance of the personal construction of meaning by children. In this context, assessment has to deal with individual students. It also has to do with individual teachers, since it cannot be assumed, from a post-modern perspective, that teachers will perceive children in identical ways. Genishi asserted that 'a post-modern frame must accommodate the fundamental shift in ways of looking at the person—both the person who is the assessor and who is the assessed. Both are capable of actively constructing their own theories of the world and their unique interpretations of situations' (1997, p. 46). Neither standardised assessments nor national curriculum can be accommodated within this frame of reference. Rather, assessment becomes an entirely personal transaction between teacher and students.

Such approaches to assessment, of course, place considerable demands on teachers. Large class sizes, competing demands for time within the classroom, and the constant external calls for accountability and standards mean that teachers will always feel pulled in multiple directions. It will probably continue to be the case that teachers will be called on to submit their students to all kinds of external assessment regimens (e.g. basic skills testing, standardised literacy and numeracy tests, tests of civic knowledge), as well as carrying out personalised assessments on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps the most significant challenge for teachers is not to let one form of assessment replace the other: different forms of assessment will need to exist side by side to meet the many demands made of schools, teachers and students.

Check your understanding

1. How do different contexts influence the kinds of assessment that are used?
2. How worthwhile are these assessments if they do not provide feedback to students?

SUMMARY

▶ There are broad social, political and economic contexts that help to shape assessment and reporting practices in schools. This is a reflection of the fact that everyone in the community has a stake in the outcomes of schooling: politicians, businesspeople, social activists and, not least, students and parents.

▶ Theoretical perspectives such as **progressivism**, post-modernism and human capital theory help to explain these contexts. Some theoretical perspective can drive the way stakeholders view assessment.

▶ The advantage of classroom assessments is that teachers can use them to provide feedback to students, to teachers and, eventually, to parents. Feedback is an important way to influence student learning directly.

▶ Assessment is used for both public purposes (accountability, national assessment) and private purposes (student learning, personal encouragement). The tension that can arise between the public and private purposes of assessment is a feature of professional life for teachers.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

constructivism A broad philosophy in educational terms that usually assumes students are active creators of knowledge rather than passive receivers of knowledge provided by teachers.

globalisation An economic process that assumes free trade and free movements without barriers and aided by technology creates optimal economic advantages.

high-stakes assessment Assessments such as end-of-school examinations that produce results having significant implications for the lives of students.

human capital theory An economic theory that argues economic development can be enhanced by the knowledge, skills and values of individuals with the consequence that higher levels of education in a society will directly affect economic growth and development.

National Assessment Program (NAP) The Education Council's regular national assessments of student achievement in ICT literacy, science, and civics and citizenship.

National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) The Education Council's annual national assessment of student achievement in literacy and numeracy administered to students in Years 3, 5 and 7.

progressivism A broad philosophical movement that in an education context highlights the experience of the students and their interaction with the environment as the optimal conditions for student learning.

stakeholders In the most general sense, people who will be affected by an activity or event and therefore have an interest in how that activity or event is managed or arranged.

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