ASSESSMENT, EQUITY, AND OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Providing all students with a fair opportunity to learn (OTL) is perhaps the most pressing issue facing the U.S. education system. Moving beyond conventional notions of OTL – as access to content, often content tested; access to resources; or access to instructional processes – the authors reconceptualize OTL in terms of interaction among learners and elements of their learning environments. Drawing on sociocultural, sociological, psychometric, and legal perspectives, this book provides historical critique, theory and principles, and concrete examples of practice through which learning, teaching, and assessment can be re-envisioned to support fair OTL for all students.

This book offers educators, researchers, and policy analysts new to sociocultural perspectives a readable and engaging introduction to fresh ideas for conceptualizing, enhancing, and assessing OTL; encourages those who already draw on sociocultural resources to focus attention on OTL and assessment; and nurtures collaboration among members of discourse communities who have rarely engaged one another's work.

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Assessment, Equity, and Opportunity to Learn

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Preface

Since its beginnings, the Spencer Foundation[1] has sought to advance knowledge about education with the aim of educational improvement. Although its core mission remains steadfast, in recent years the foundation has initiated proactive practices to identify research and other compelling projects that show promise for the improvement of teaching and learning and the realization of the potential for education to promote more equalizing opportunities. In its pursuit of research agendas in these areas of inquiry, Spencer has been been able to organize the convening of scholars and practitioners who may not otherwise have had occasion to do so regarding important problems of education. It was such a project that led to the publication of *Assessment, Equity, and Opportunity to Learn*.

During its 100-year history, testing likely has not had the powerful influence it has in today's "culture of evidence" climate. Assessments of student learning have taken on major importance in the current educational policy context, with significant consequences for individual children and their teachers and their schools. It was in this high-stakes climate in late 2001 that Pamela A. Moss, Diana C. Pullin, James Paul Gee, and Edward H. Haertel approached Spencer to support an interdisciplinary initiative focused on expanding the foundations of educational assessment. Their intention was to enhance the dialogue concerning the theories and methods through which assessment is conceptualized, practiced, and evaluated by bringing together scholars from several disciplines to study its practice. They had observed that educational assessment is largely informed by the field of psychometrics and the disciplines of psychology and mathematics on which it draws. They wondered what assessment might look like were it informed by additional research traditions. By casting a wider disciplinary net that included sociocultural and situated perspectives from within anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and psychology, they hoped to explore a range of assumptions about assessment

and imagine an array of alternative practices. With Spencer's support, this small core group of scholars was expanded to include King Beach, James G. Greeno, Carol D. Lee, Hugh Mehan, Robert J. Mislevy, Fritz Mosher, and Lauren Jones Young, with staff assistance provided by Doris Fischer and Andrew Ho.

The goal for the first few meetings was to look broadly at testing practices and outline a research and development agenda to conceptualize and study various means of assessment – alternative strategies for gathering, warranting, and using trustworthy evidence about individuals and institutions – that might complement and/or challenge practices based in psychometrics. A second aim was to situate psychometric and alternative assessment practices in their sociocultural contexts in order to illuminate their limitations and effects. Such discussions were intended to surface tacit assumptions, identify the unintended consequences of current practices in educational assessment, and specify the kinds of new knowledge that might be needed to inform more constructive and equitable practices in the future.

Early in the discussions, the group learned that the participants could talk to each other in spite of occasional translation difficulties and that there were good reasons to try to overcome these difficulties. Modern psychometricians have tools that can be used to model or measure almost anything about which one can be really clear, including the kinds of capabilities that can be considered to exist in a community of practice and the social artifacts that support it in its area of activity. This is no longer your daddy's psychometrics, but you do have to be clear about what you want to model. All, or most, of the group would probably accept that it would be possible to think of such group products as having reflections of some sort inside individuals' "heads," but it became clear that the "psych" part of psychometrics is not essential and that our colleagues could simply be called metricians or be prefixed however seemed most appropriate to the task at hand.

Second, it did not take long to realize that everyone agreed the real issue is not testing per se so much as learning and teaching – what should students learn, and what is the school's responsibility for whether they learn it? Tests or assessments come into the picture because of school systems' reliance on them as evidence of what individual students or groups have learned and as evidence of whether schools are meeting their responsibility in enabling students to learn what they should, or at least in providing them a fair opportunity to learn.

Our discussions focused on the issues of whether currently widely used assessments represent a valid report of whether students are able to meet the publicly asserted state standards for "proficiency" in core subjects and skills

and whether those standards themselves adequately reflect what would be required to meet the more general rhetorical requirement that students be able to function adequately in further education or in the modern economy and polity.

A thoroughgoing critique from the perspectives of both cognitive science and the situative, sociological, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic viewpoints of the sort to be found in this volume suggests that they have not been validated for either. Current assessments seem to focus primarily on coverage of subject matter content and basic skills. It may be that successful performance on these assessments also requires other aptitudes or capabilities, but if teachers and other educators who are held accountable for students' success on these assessments think that their main focus is on discrete facts and skills, the tests may "drive" instruction to concentrate on just those things. However, if real proficiency requires students to have additional skills, dispositions, and aptitudes, tests of this sort can deprive them – particularly those at highest risk of performing badly – of the opportunity to gain this necessary knowledge by narrowing instruction only to what the tests are perceived to emphasize.

Our discussions, in fact, focused in some detail on the other kinds of experiences and chances to participate in and acquire the practices that characterize effective functioning in disciplinary or occupational groups, which might also be called habits of discourse or subject- or activity-specific aptitudes or dispositions. These experiences and opportunities are hardly evenly distributed among students from different social groups in this country, and although the resulting practices seem to play a strong role in how easily students learn more traditional content in school, they do not tend to be taught explicitly in school, nor are students given exposure to them. If assessments were developed that were designed to measure and report specifically on such practices, their results could make it clear that some children have not had the opportunity to learn or be exposed to them. On the other hand, they would probably be even "harder" than conventional tests for students from disadvantaged groups, so if they were used for purposes that were consequential for those students, they would seem to be even more unfair. However, if they were treated as measures of opportunity to learn that were consequential to schools, they might raise the question of whether the schools should be held responsible for providing experiences they had never tried to provide before.

This is only a taste of the complexity of the group's deliberations, but we would suggest that our answer comes down on the side of yes – the schools should be responsible for learning what kinds of experiences are required for students to be able to participate effectively in the practices that will give them

reasonable access to the benefits of modern society; for trying to provide all of those experiences that are reasonably within their power; and for advocating for more of the needed resources if they are falling short. Given that there is only limited knowledge available on how to do this – in the schools or anywhere else – it would not be reasonable to frame accountability in any punitive way for not succeeding in fulfilling this responsibility. Rather, the requirement should be to attend to each student's and all students' progress through assessment and observational processes appropriate to that task and to make best-effort attempts to respond to their stages of progress. The goal should be to move the students ahead while taking steps to keep track of the results of those efforts in order to contribute to the store of knowledge about what it takes to provide real opportunities to learn what really is required for opportunity in this society. Clearly, it should be the responsibility of the research community to work with the schools to help them in fulfilling these obligations.

We suggest that this book is advocating not just an *equal* opportunity to learn as a criterion for judging our schools, but rather an "*equalizing* opportunity to learn." Students differ in ways that require differential experiences if they are all to reach or exceed some real standard for what is required for adequate functioning in modern society. Within the limits of their capabilities, schools should adapt to those needs. It will be clear to readers of this book that we all have a great deal to learn in order to know how to do this, but we hope that following the paths suggested will considerably increase the chances of finding the answers.

Fritz Mosher
Lauren Jones Young

Note

1. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spencer Foundation.

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Brian J. Girard is a doctoral student in educational foundations and policy at the University of Michigan and a former junior high school English and history teacher in Philadelphia. His research interests include multicultural education, sociocultural theory, and disciplinary knowledge in teaching history and social studies.

James G. Greeno is a cognitive scientist who has studied understanding and learning of concepts throughout the nearly five decades of his career. Currently, his research focuses on conceptual understanding and learning in discourse, especially in middle school mathematics classrooms. He also has

written general articles and review chapters contributing to the development of a situative view of cognition and learning, aimed toward integrating concepts and methods of the individual cognitive-science and sociocultural approaches to cognition and learning. Greeno's PhD, in experimental psychology, was granted by the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. He taught in departments of psychology at Indiana University, Bloomington; the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and the University of Pittsburgh, and in schools of education at the University of California, Berkeley, and Stanford University. He is a Margaret Jacks Professor of Education Emeritus, Stanford University and a Visiting Professor of Education, University of Pittsburgh. He is a member of the National Academy of Education, the Society of Experimental Psychologists, the American Psychological Association, the Cognitive Science Society, the American Educational Research Association, the Society of the Learning Sciences, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Melissa S. Gresalfi is assistant Professor in the learning sciences at Indiana University. Her work examines how opportunities to learn get constructed in mathematics classrooms and how, when, and why different students take up those opportunities. This focus enables exploration of the extent to which classroom practices are equitable and examination of categories such as race, gender, and previous mathematical experience as they arise in interaction.

Edward H. Haertel is the Jacks Family Professor of Education and Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs at Stanford University, where he has served on the faculty since 1980. Haertel is an expert in educational testing and assessment, working at the intersection of technical and policy issues that arise in the uses of achievement testing for accountability. He has been closely involved in the creation and maintenance of California's school accountability system and has advised other states and testing companies. Haertel is also concerned with the construction of validity arguments for high-stakes testing, the logic and implementation of standard-setting methods, and comparisons of trends on different tests and in different reporting metrics. Haertel has served as president of the National Council on Measurement in Education (1998–99), as a member of the National Assessment Governing Board (1997–2003), and as a member of the joint committee responsible for the 1999 edition of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1994–99). He was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1994–95), is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, and is a member of the National Academy of Education.

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Lauren Jones Young is Director of the Spencer Foundation's Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Resources Program. Prior to her appointment at Spencer, Young was Associate Professor of Teacher Education and Educational Administration at Michigan State University. She was the recipient of the university's Teacher-Scholar and Crystal Apple awards for her teaching and research focused on issues of race, gender, class, and social justice in teacher preparation and teaching practices. In addition to two edited books and a number of monographs, she has published several articles in leading education journals. A graduate of the Harvard University program in social policy and education, Dr. Young's life's work, both in and outside the academy, has centered on expanding learning and life opportunities for children.

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