



Students' conceptions of assessment purposes in a low stakes secondary-school context: A mixed methodology approach



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ABSTRACT

Though assessment in its early history was conceived as a measurement device, alternative approaches to assessment of student achievement have appeared the past few decades. In this context, studies have been conducted to investigate students' conceptions of assessment approaches and purposes, as there is evidence that these will affect their learning and ultimately their achievement. This study uses a sequential mixed methods design to investigate students' conceptions about the purposes of assessment and their definitions of assessment. A questionnaire was administered to 599 lower secondary school students in Cyprus, followed by group interviews with 15 students to explain and build upon initial quantitative findings. Results show that students' perceptions are in alignment with the current shift in assessment to be used primarily for enhancing teaching and learning. Students seem to agree with the legitimate purposes of assessment and realize that it is an ongoing procedure linked with teaching and learning.

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1. Introduction

Educational change can be effective if students' conceptions are in alignment with that change as conceptions relate to the orientation and effort they give to learning (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). This is particularly true in on-going classroom assessment practices with students' active involvement. Heritage (2013) stated that students should be seen as equal stakeholders as teachers, especially in assessment, if it is to be used for improving their learning. Learning can only be achieved by students; teachers cannot learn for them (Harlen & James, 1997; Struyven, Dochy & Jahnsen, 2005). Investigating students' conceptions is not simple because "as long as assessment is used for multiple purposes and have differing consequences, students will develop complex and highly contingent conceptions of assessment" (Brown, McInerney & Liem, 2009a, p. 8).

While the term 'belief' is considered as just a little more than opinion with a character to act (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984), Remesal (2011) argues that beliefs are the ones organized internally and as a result build up conceptions (Goodenough, 1990; Green, 1971). The terminology 'perspectives' is believed to

encompass a stronger meaning including both the beliefs students have about their work (goals, purposes, conceptions) and "the ways in which they give meaning to these beliefs by their behavior in the classroom" (Pajares, 1992, p. 314–315). Brown and colleagues have developed a comprehensive research program on 'conceptions' of assessment since the early 2000's. They grounded their research on Thompson's definition of conceptions as "a more general mental structure, encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like" (Thompson, 1992). Furthermore, it is believed that conceptions represent different categories of ideas held by individuals behind their descriptions of their experience (Pratt, 1992). Thus, conceptions act as a framework through which a student or a teacher, for example, views, interprets, and interacts, within the teaching environment (Marton, 1981). According to a more recent view when referring to assessment in particular, conception as a term encompasses beliefs and views regarding assessment (Fulmer, Lee & Tan, 2015). Thus the term 'conceptions' was preferred for this study.

Research has emphasized students' conceptions about school improvement and evaluation of teaching, but students' conceptions of their own assessment is a relatively under-researched area. The current study had two main research aims: to describe and explain Cypriot secondary school students' conceptions of assessment purposes and to explore what students associate with the

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term assessment, as conceptions in this country have not been adequately studied. Specifically, there has been only one unpublished study in Cyprus, by Michaelides and Sidiropoulou (2014), about university students' conceptions of assessment in distance education, which is a different context considering the level of education and curriculum. A second study with teacher samples found that certain assessment conceptions in Cyprus are different than in New Zealand, and those discrepancies can be traced back to differences in educational system policies and practices (Brown & Michaelides, 2011). A series of survey studies in New Zealand have attempted plausible explanations of students' conceptions and their relationships to achievement scores and types of assessment (e.g. Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008; Brown, Peterson, & Irving, 2009b; Brown, Irving, Peterson, & Hirschfeld, 2009c). But these are speculative without independent corroboration or exploration. This study investigates student assessment conceptions in a different context and triangulates survey findings by asking students directly as to their reasoning behind their "fill in the bubble" responses to allow a more detailed exploration of survey responses.

1.1. Students' conceptions of assessment

Fullan and Stiegelbauer as early as 1991 wondered: "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 170). Within a children's rights framework, student views matter especially in domains that affect them. Students may provide information about the implementation of educational policies, the benefits of assessment to their learning, and the fairness of examination systems (Elwood and Lundy, 2010). The way students understand the purposes, the content and the skills necessary to take an assessment, influence their experience with the assessment, such as their learning strategies (Struyven et al., 2005), while their reaction to the assessment situation may influence the assessment outcome (Eklöf and Nyroos, 2013; Michaelides, 2014).

Large-scale survey studies originating in New Zealand based on a standardized questionnaire have looked into important aspects of students' attitudes and conceptions about assessment (e.g. Brown & Hirschfeld, 2007, 2008; Hirschfeld & Brown, 2009). In the 6th version of the Students' Conceptions of Assessment (SCoA; Brown, 2011) inventory four major and eight sub-conceptions are exemplified below.

The *Affect* conception is centered around two sub conceptions, namely assessment is affecting the class and assessment is affecting myself. The affect notion is geared around the idea that students perceive assessment as motivating for their class to cooperate and as an enjoyable and positive experience. This was confirmed by studies such as Lord and Jones (2006), Dochy and McDowell (1997) and Cowie (2005) where students seemed to enjoy a variety of assessment approaches, and at the same time they appreciated high stakes tests for their clear-cut measures of progress.

The *Improvement* conception includes notions of assessment as helping both teachers and students improve. The concept of assessment for improving learning is usually associated with assessment as having clear and not explicit criteria, and communicating to students what still needs to be pursued (Peterson & Irving, 2008). Students conceived assessment as helpful when assessment-based feedback would help them improve and when it provides useful information about both their progress and performance (Pajares & Graham, 1998; Peterson & Irving, 2008). Correspondingly, inferences about students stemming from assessment performance would help teachers to

improve their instruction (Brown, 2011); the teaching process evolves after taking assessment outcomes into account.

Assessment as an *External* attribution mechanism comprises assessment as a means to evaluate schools and as a reflection of the student's capabilities and subsequently a prediction of their personal future. This conception relates to accountability, particularly when high-stakes consequences are attached (Brown et al., 2009a). Such beliefs imply external locus of control for attributions of behavior and lack of personal autonomy (Brown, 2011).

Assessment may also be conceived as a *Negative* process by students when believed to be bad or when it can be ignored. Assessment may be considered as negative by students if they think of it as unfair or related to teacher subjectivity (Matos, Cirino & Brown, 2009). Perceived unfairness or inaccuracy in assessment results may lead students to ignore the process, and consequently deprive themselves of positive uses of assessment results in their schooling. For example a study with African American and Latino high school students found that college admissions exams were perceived as unfair because of their impact upon student life chances (Walpole et al., 2005); also certain groups of high school students in Australia were consistent about their conceptions in teacher subjectivity in assessments (Moni, van Kraayenoord & Baker, 2002), while students in New Zealand perceived assessment as irrelevant and ultimately tended to ignore it (Peterson & Irving, 2008).

The SCoA inventory initially developed by Brown (2004) was constructed by making a content analysis of empirical studies on students' conceptions mainly in New Zealand but also in other countries. Versions of SCoA have been used in Hong Kong (Wang & Brown, 2014), Brazil (Matos et al., 2009), Germany (Hirschfeld & von Brachel, 2008), the Netherlands (Segers & Tillemma, 2011), Iran (Brown, Pishghadam & Sadafian, 2014), the US (Wise & Cotten, 2009), and Cyprus (Michaelides & Sidiropoulou, 2014) usually involving large samples. These studies identify student assessment conceptions which usually differ in levels of endorsement, revealing the significance of local educational policies and contexts in shaping how students view and conceive of assessment and its purposes.

1.2. What students associate with the term assessment

The idea of assessment to support learning is not new. However, it was not until the late 1980s when the idea that classroom assessment practices could both enhance or even limit student learning began to gain widespread acceptance (Wiliam, 2011). Drawing on developments in the fields of socio-cultural learning theory, metacognitive and self-regulation theory, many researchers began to argue more strongly that the learner had to be assigned a key role in the assessment process (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Heritage, 2013; Sadler, 1989; Torrance & Pryor, 1998). Of central importance was the need for the learner to be able to assess and improve the quality of the work produced through the application of the skills of self-monitoring and self-regulation, which has been termed assessment for learning (Dixon & Haigh, 2009). The shift was in the view of assessment not only as a means to an end, to determine measurement and thus certification, but also as "a tool for learning" (Dochy & McDowell, 1997, p. 279). Also, assessment can only steer learning when there is a constructive alignment between learning, instruction and assessment (Biggs, 1996). According to leading theorists of the assessment field practices can be extremely powerful in hindering or enhancing students' learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Wiliam, 2011). Thus it was considered as important, to investigate if students are in agreement with recent policies in Cypriot education where assessment is broader than examinations, grades and test scores.

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