



Students' conceptions about a fair assessment of their learning



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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to know the conceptions of primary and secondary school students about what constitutes a fair assessment. To achieve this aim, a phenomenographic study was carried out with 32 students. In a broad sense, the results showed that there were two types of conceptions. On one hand, a conception of fair assessment related to equality, transparency, objectivity, and evaluation of class content; that is, an egalitarian conception of fair assessment. On the other hand, a conception associated with ideas such as adaptation, diversification of tests, and qualitative assessment, even taking into account students' effort and attitudes, which define a conception of fair assessment linked to equity. These conceptions are associated with the concepts of legal justice and social justice, respectively and they contrast with the nature of external evaluations currently carried out.

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1. Introduction

It is not very risky to affirm that the assessment of students is one of the activities with worst reputation within the educational system. This is what experience tells us and what is reflected in research, such as in the classic study by Sambell, McDowell, and Brown (1997). In this paper the authors found that teachers and students had very negative perceptions about the practice of assessment, both because of the way in which the assessment process unfolded and because of its implications; they essentially related the practice of assessment with a search for accountability, in which assessment functioned to certify, classify, and label students.

Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps because of the importance assessment has in the process of teaching and learning and the influence conceptions have on its development, in recent years a line of empirical research seeking to advance the understanding about teachers' and students' conceptions of assessment has gained strength. The reason is clear: if we expand our knowledge about the conceptions students have about assessment, we will be in better condition to develop better assessments, those that most closely match their needs and expectations, and thus help improve their learning (Murillo & Hidalgo, 2015a; Brown, 2008; Ibarra-Sáiz

& Rodríguez-Gómez, 2014; Rodríguez-Conde, Olmos-Migueláñez, & Nieto-Isidro, 2014).

In this study we focused on examining the conceptions of students in regards to a key element: what constitutes, for them, a fair assessment (Tierney, 2013). It seems reasonable to think that if students consider that assessments are unfair, the influence these may have on their subsequent learning may be considerably lower than if they think otherwise. With this in mind, we designed a phenomenographic study with students from primary and secondary education, with different characteristics and from different contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

We define conceptions as a set of beliefs originated in the experiences of each person and entrenched in the social environment through interactions (Feixas, 2010; Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Marton, 1981; Säljö, 1994). In great part they are constructed through the interaction with other people, thus the way in which we conceive the world is directly influenced by the individuals around us.

Within the broad area of research on students' conceptions within the educational field, many researchers have specifically focused on their conceptions about assessment (Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). Although, among all, the work carried out by Professor Galvin Brown and his team at the University of Auckland for more than a decade deserves recognition (Brown & Harris,

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2012; Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008; Brown, 2008; Brown, 2011; Brown, Irving, Peterson, & Hirschfeld, 2009; Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, & Yu, 2009; Harris, Brown, & Harnett, 2014, Hirschfeld & Brown, 2009; Peterson & Irving, 2008).

In research by Brown and Hirschfeld (2008), for example, an ex post facto study was conducted with 3469 high school students in order to know the students' conceptions about assessment. Factor analysis showed that students had four different types of conceptions: (a) assessment as a way to improve performance and learning, (b) assessment makes students accountable and responsible, (c) assessment is irrelevant, and (d) assessment is enjoyable. The authors concluded that the first conception positively correlated with performance, while students' conceptions b, c and d have a negative correlation.

In the same vein, Peterson and Irving (2008) inquired about the conceptions that high school students had about assessment and its communication. The study, of qualitative nature, involved five focus groups in four schools in New Zealand. The results indicated that students conceived assessment as useful when it served to enhance their learning, and irrelevant when it did not provide them with useful information. The authors concluded that their study offered support from a qualitative standpoint to the findings of the previous quantitative studies by Brown et al.

In a later study, Brown, Irving et al. (2009) added that students' conceptions were closer to assessment as a training practice and not as practice of teacher control. Shortly afterward, Brown and Harris (2012) complemented these results by carrying out a study aiming to know whether there were differences in the conceptions of students based on their level of education. The results showed that students in secondary education, in relation to those in primary education, scored higher in conceiving assessment as irrelevant in comparison to conceiving it as external, as a tool for improvement, or as pleasant. However, in general, all students, without significant differences, conceived assessment mostly as a means to help improve their learning.

Segers and Tillema (2011), continuing with this line of research, conducted a study with 712 students in the Netherlands with the objective to know their conceptions about the purpose of assessment. Factor analysis suggested that there were five conceptions about the purpose of assessment: (a) it is beneficial for learning, (b) it serves as an instrument to measure what students have learned, (c) it is pleasant to students, (d) it improves the climate of support and collaboration within the classroom, and (e) it serves to exert accountability. The authors noted that students who perceived assessment as an instrument to exert accountability associated it to a profoundly unfair practice.

This issue of the meaning of a fair or unfair assessment has been acquiring special importance in recent years. However, even though the theoretical contributions on the subject multiply (eg, Cole & Zieky, 2001; Gipps & Stobart, 2009; Pepper & Pathak, 2008; Pettifor & Saklofske, 2012), few empirical studies have so far been carried out to explore this subject (Tierney, 2013).

One of the first studies examining students' conceptions about fair assessment was carried out by Sambell et al. (1997) in the United Kingdom. Their objective was to learn about the perceptions of fair assessment from the perspective of students and determine the impact of the validity of such evaluative practice. The methodology used was the development of thirteen case studies to examine alternative methods of assessment and the validity thereof through interviews with students and teachers, observation, and review of relevant assessment materials. The main findings of the study showed that: (a) traditional assessment methods interfered with the implementation of alternative assessment methods, which were perceived as a fairer process for student learning, (b) final assessments, especially through examinations, were deeply unfair and did not reflect everything

students had acquired and learned (c) students claimed that for an evaluation to be fair, it had to be close to their lives and help them develop skills used in their daily lives. Knowledge considered little useful by students was perceived as unfair. As a final conclusion, the authors pointed out that students did not refer to the term "validity" when talking about a fair assessment, but rather to impartiality, a concept closer to equity in assessment.

More than a decade later, Pepper and Pathak (2008), from the Southwestern University (Texas), conducted a study that sought to examine students' perceptions of justice about how the practice of fair assessment contributes to the methods used in assessment in higher education. To this end, a double quantitative study was carried out. The first of these studies consisted in the application of a scale adapted from the *Selection Procedural Justice Scale* to determine the attitude of students towards Evaluative Justice. The second study was experimental in nature, and included two groups of college students. Through simulation exercises, the six conditions that may influence fair assessment were implemented in both groups: assessment explicitness (high or low), pro-activity (high or low) and feedback (high or low). The results of both studies showed that explicitness in assessment and grading criteria, frequent feedback, and proactivity in the assessment process, led students to conceive assessment as fair. Also, from the perspective of students, the explicitness of the criteria and feedback were the two most influential aspects in the development of a fair assessment practice.

One of the most interesting studies in this area, among those conducted to date is that by Scott, Webber, Lupart, Aitken, and Scott (2014). These authors followed a mixed design approach (quantitative and qualitative) in order to examine the conceptions of what is a fair assessment. Participants were 3312 teachers, students, family members, and senior management staff. The results showed that fair assessment practices were closer to the concept of equity and offered five key ideas about what a fair assessment should be like: (a) educators should strive to understand the impact their assessment practices have on students and their families; (b) assessment should be individualized, to meet the capacity, socioeconomic status, culture, and language of each student; (c) it is necessary that all members of the educational community denounce unsubstantiated and illogical assessment practices; (d) the frequency, intensity, and intrusion of assessments should not overwhelm students or their families; and finally (e) assessment should not be used to counter inappropriate student behaviour or to reward certain desired behaviours.

At a time when external standardized tests are increasingly used worldwide, and consequently both teachers and students are receiving increased pressure, interest in designing systems of assessment that are valid and reliable but also useful and fair has grown. The few studies that have been carried out in this area highlight the importance of the subject, but much remains to know.

Therefore, this research seeks to understand the conceptions that students from primary and secondary education have about fair assessment.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach used in this study was phenomenography. This methodology aims to examine the views of people about a particular phenomenon (Bowden & Walsh, 2000; Marton, 1986; Richardson, 1999), making it especially suited to our research. The result of understanding these concepts is a range of the different ways of thinking and conceptualizing an event. Conceptions are considered as beliefs of human thinking, and if we understand different conceptions we will be able to expand what we know about the psyche of different people.

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