



Re-conceptualizing classroom assessment fairness: A systematic meta-ethnography of assessment literature and beyond

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ABSTRACT

Conceptualizing fairness in student assessment at classroom levels has been an area of focus in recent years given the growing emphasis on assessment-driven teaching and educational accountability across educational systems. However, previous studies into assessment fairness have predominantly drawn on assessment-based literature to conceptualize fairness. While this literature is central to the construct, we argue that it does not fully account for the dynamic relationship between assessment, teaching, and learning within the diverse socio-cultural classroom contexts. Therefore, using a systematic meta-ethnographic review of 150 studies, this study identifies a more comprehensive conception of fairness for classroom assessment drawn from not only assessment literature but also from literature beyond assessment, which has not already been included in the process of re-conceptualizing classroom assessment fairness. The results of this study present a conceptualization of classroom assessment fairness with a dominant focus on the role of assessment fairness in supporting student learning.

1. Introduction

Fairness has consistently been emphasized in classroom assessment (CA) standards and practices as an essential quality and a significant dimension of teachers' assessment literacy (DeLuca, 2012; DeLuca, LaPointe-McEwan, & Luhanga, 2016; Xu & Brown, 2016). Empirical studies have demonstrated that teachers' fairness practices are associated with positive learning effects for students such as cognitive learning (Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014; Molinari, Speltini, & Passini, 2013), instructor satisfaction (Wendorf & Alexander, 2005), self-efficacy (Vallade, Martin, & Weber, 2014), legitimization of teacher and school authority (Gouveia-Pereira, Vala, Palmonari, & Rubini, 2003; Nelson, Shechter, & Ben-Ari, 2014), political trust (Abdelzadeh, Zetterberg, & Ekman, 2015), and positive evaluation of teacher expertise (Cronen & Fuller, 1976; Gotlieb, 2009; Rodabaugh & Kravitz, 1994). In contrast, perceived unfair behavior is associated with outcomes such as aggression and hostility (Horan, Chory, Carton, Miller, & Raposo, 2013; Uludag, 2014), truancy (Ishak & Fin, 2013), headache (Lenzi et al., 2013), and cheating (Lemons, Martin, & Seaton, 2011). Unfortunately, research has repeatedly found that students report high levels of unfairness during assessment processes (Buttner, 2004; Čiu-ladienė & Račelytė, 2016). Despite repeated calls for teachers to enact fair assessments (Sanders et al., 1990; Scott, Webber, Lupart, Aitken, &

Scott, 2014; Tierney, 2013), researchers have argued that compared to other fundamental aspects of assessment (i.e., validity and reliability), there has been limited conceptualizations of fairness for CA contexts (Tierney, 2013). Moreover, research has revealed that teachers across contexts lack consensus on what they consider as fair assessment practices (Green, Johnson, Kim, & Pope, 2007; Liu, Johnson, & Fan, 2016).

In an effort to define CA fairness, several researchers have empirically examined teachers' perspectives and practices (Green et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2016; Tierney, 2014). As an example, Green et al. (2007), building on the previous conceptualizations of fairness in psychometrics and large-scale assessment, constructed items to measure teachers' ethical and fair dilemmas predominantly in summative assessment. They found that teachers held high agreement in items related to communication about grading, confidentiality, and multiple assessment opportunities but had low agreement on items related to standardized test administration, grading practices, and addressing biases.

Another researcher, Tierney (2014), disillusioned by the extant conceptualizations of CA fairness predicated on a large-scale psychometric tradition, adopted an inductive approach to conceptualize CA fairness by studying teachers' perspectives. Drawing on the results of her interviews with teachers, she suggested that teachers associate CA fairness with issues such as constructive classroom environment,

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transparent communication, equity and equality, and reflective thinking. Tierney's findings suggest that conceptualizing fairness through psychometric and large-scale traditions maintains conventional distinctions between assessment and teaching while the classroom presents a different context for the enactment of fairness. Accordingly, CA fairness needs to align with CA theory and definition and be re-conceptualized towards what Brookhart (2003) calls classroometric theory.

In this study, we approach CA as a broad and evolving conceptualization of a process that teachers and students use in collecting, evaluating, and using evidence of student learning for a variety of purposes, including diagnosing student strengths and weaknesses, monitoring student progress toward meeting desired levels of proficiency, assigning grades, and providing feedback to parents (McMillan, 2013, p. 4).

In this conceptualization, teachers and students play active roles in selecting and constructing opportunities for assessment that both formatively support and motivate learning as well as summatively gauge learning progress. In addition, contemporary notions of formative assessment, or *assessment for learning*, further emphasize student-involved assessments that engage them in self- and peer-assessment processes that stimulate learning of content and self-regulation skills. Collectively, this conceptualization of CA is rooted in a socio-cultural understanding in which assessment is a dynamic process shaped by teachers, students, curriculum, pedagogy, and the learning culture (Cowie, 2015; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Klenowski, 2009; Shepard, 2001).

Building on this definition and compared to large-scale assessment contexts, central to classroom contexts are two distinct but key priorities: (a) assessment is used to not only for accountability purposes but also to support student learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002; William, 2011), and (b) assessment is highly integrated with teaching and must consider the social, cultural, and relational dimensions of classrooms (Cowie, 2015; Klenowski, 2009; Tierney, 2016). McMillan (2013) further distinguishes CA from large-scale and standardized assessments, by noting it is "locally controlled and consists of a broad range of measures....as well as informal ways of collecting evidence. It is more than mere measurement or quantification of student performance" (p. 4). Therefore, solely adopting a psychometric paradigm to study CA fairness would overlook the wide range of CA practices that the dynamics of a classroom might bring to the table.

While previous CA researchers have begun to shed light on a classroom-centric conceptualization of assessment fairness, the majority of previous studies have drawn primarily on assessment literature to characterize fairness. This paper marks a further attempt to conceptualize CA fairness by systematically reviewing the literature of classroom fairness not only from an assessment point of view, but more importantly from the point of view of justice researchers in education and related fields, which has not already been included in the process of reconceptualizing CA fairness. Hence, the overarching purpose of this study is to propose a conceptualization of CA fairness by identifying fairness themes from both assessment and non-assessment literature.

2. Method

2.1. Search and selection process

A systematic meta-ethnography can help construct conceptual frameworks for complex constructs, such as CA fairness, by critically and systematically examining literature across relevant domain areas (Nye, Melendez-Torres, & Bonell, 2016). Therefore, a systematic meta-ethnography was used to guide the selection, review, and synthesis of individual studies across assessment- and non-assessment educational literature domains to construct a CA fairness conceptualization for this study.

A four-phase approach was adopted to select studies for inclusion. In phase 1, to find relevant literature, several keywords were identified

after an initial scan of the available studies on fairness with a focus on education, classrooms, and assessment. Primary keywords included fairness; classroom; education; and assessment with additional proxy keywords of objectivity; bias; values; ethics; equality; equity; equitable; and justice. Building on these keywords, Google Scholar database was searched using the following terminologies: 'bias in classroom assessment'; 'classroom justice'; 'equality in classroom'; 'equity in classroom'; 'objectivity in classroom'; 'fairness and classroom'; 'fairness and classroom assessment'; 'ethics in classroom'; 'values in classroom assessment'; and 'equitable assessment'. This search retrieved 8549 studies. A temporal period was not included in the search software to comprehensively identify relevant studies in both CA and beyond assessment literature.

In phase 2, the 8549 publications were subjected to a selection process. After screening the titles, two researchers systematically and collectively excluded studies that (a) did not include the fairness keywords identified above in their titles, and that did not appear to focus on fairness issues ($n = 4985$), and (b) used fairness keywords in their titles but were not conducted in education and related fields ($n = 2043$).

Reviewing the abstracts of the remaining 1521 studies, two researchers systematically and collectively excluded two groups of sources. First, 1143 sources that dealt with issues of social justice, equity, fairness, ethics, inclusion, morality, and democracy in instructional contexts and domains beyond the classroom as the present study aimed to focus on fairness inside the classroom context, and contribute to how fairness can be enhanced for the majority of students rather than for specific groups such as disability students and English learners. Nonetheless, studies that focused on accommodation for these two groups were included because accommodation has previously been emphasized as a fairness issue in the CA standards (DeLuca et al., 2016). Second, since the nature of CA fairness is different from fairness in large-scale traditions (Camilli, 2013; Tierney, 2014), studies ($n = 128$) that examined fairness in standardized testing contexts were excluded.

Finally, full texts of the remaining studies ($n = 250$) that solely focused on classroom fairness were retrieved barring for the ones that were (a) unavailable via web access ($n = 48$), or (b) books, non-peer-reviewed papers, conference papers, news, institutional documents, book reviews, editorial of special issues, theses, and dissertations ($n = 95$). Therefore, a total number of 107 studies, including book chapters and peer-reviewed papers were included in this review. In following best practices for meta-ethnographies as suggested by Nye et al. (2016), iterative literature searches were continued by exploring the three additional educational databases of Education Source, ERIC, and PsycINFO. Comparing studies retrieved through the Google Scholar search with articles retrieved through these databases, an additional 17 relevant studies were identified. Tracking of references of the included studies from both Google Scholar and Educational databases led to the identification of additional 26 relevant studies. As a result, a total of 150 sources were identified that met the search criteria for this study.

2.2. Data analysis

In phase 3, the 150 studies were categorized into two groups: assessment and non-assessment, based on three criteria: (a) whether the study had been written with a focus on fairness within (or outside of) the scope and interest of educational assessment; (b) if the study was published in (non-) assessment journals; and (c) if the study had been carried out by an assessment specialist(s). The journal scope and author specialization were determined by checking the website of journals and authors' affiliations as outlined in the manuscripts and in the university profiles. Taken together, these three criteria helped determine if a study was grounded in the literature of assessment or non-assessment as the purpose of this study was to realize the current literature of fairness in classroom assessment and then reconceptualize it by drawing on

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