

## Through the lens of justice. A systematic review on equity and fairness in learning assessment

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### Abstract

Empirical and theoretical studies have highlighted the need to investigate the implications of the introduction of the issue of justice in education. However, little is known about the specific field of learning assessment and about the possible enhancement for assessment processes when inspired by discourses about justice, equity and fairness. What does it mean to rethink assessment through the lens of justice? The present paper aims to uncover key information related to this issue with the aim to provide greater understanding about how to build more equitable assessment practices.

The PRISMA guidelines were adopted. Internet-based bibliographic searches were conducted via 2 major electronic databases (ERIC and Education Source) to access studies examining the association between the issues of justice, fairness and equity in assessment. A total of 26 empirical studies meeting the inclusion criteria were identified. The studies reported the attention to both cultures and practices related to fairness in assessment, as well as a focus on addressing diversity in the classroom moving away from a model of adjustments and reasonable accommodations towards an equitable and universal assessment. Additional research is important to clarify these issues and an important effort should be made to construct better assessment practices based on students and teachers' perceptions of justice.

**Keywords:** equity; assessment for learning; assessment for social justice; fair assessment; systematic review.

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### 1. Rationale

Assessment has always been an integral part of schooling and education, becoming a focus of attention for pupils, parents, teachers, researchers and policy makers. Teachers use assessments to make adjustments to teaching; students use

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assessments to make decisions about their educational experiences; parents to learn about the progress of their children and to make decisions about the quality of education offered in different schools; policy makers to provide information about the quality of schools or curricula. So ultimately all assessments are used to support decisions. Such a principle is crucial since the quality of decisions will depend on the quality of the assessment (Wiliam, 2008). For the last three decades researchers have been advocating a shift in assessment culture from assessment of learning to assessment for learning (AfL) (Sambell *et al.*, 2013; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011). Nevertheless, assessment seems particularly resistant to change even if very recently the introduction of descriptive judgments instead of the numerical rating in Italian primary schools stimulated a strong debate (OM 172 - 4 dicembre 2020; Grion *et al.*, 2021).

Literature on the current paradigm of assessment, AfL, reveals that it can be conceptualized as “part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 264) where the focus is directly on the learner’s developing capabilities, while these are in the process of being developed (Black *et al.*, 2003; Swaffield, 2011; Aquario, 2019). These aspects are clearly stated also in the 2013 OECD report, Synergies for Better Learning.

The impact of AfL on learning has been widely addressed in the literature, but less attention has been paid to the impact of AfL to supporting equity and justice goals (Benadusi, Giancola, 2021; Unesco, 2015; OECD, 2012), becoming AfLE(quity) that implies greater attention to the issues of diversity and justice: “*Considerable discussion pertains to validity and reliability, but much less focuses on fairness, and little guidance for fair AfL is given*” (Tierney, 2014, p. 56).

Even if a change has become evident also in recent teacher standards, which are more focused than in the past on assessment for learning and fairness (Pastore, Andrade, 2019), work remains to be done to deepen the discourse on justice and diversity in educational contexts as well as the implications and the related meaning of equity and fairness in assessment processes.

Based on these premises, the current systematic review aims to bridge a gap in the literature related to this issue by collecting and analysing two specific aspects:

- What does it mean to rethink assessment through the lens of equity/fairness? And how can “fair/equitable assessment” be defined?
- When an assessment process or practice is fair/equitable from the student perspective?

The review is implemented by adopting Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021).

Systematic reviews serve many critical roles. They can provide syntheses of the state of knowledge in a field; they can address questions that otherwise could not be answered by individual studies; they can identify problems in primary research that should be rectified in future studies; and they can generate or evaluate theories about how or why phenomena occur. In this specific case, the systematic review has been implemented with a twofold aim, to provide an informed synthesis of the state of knowledge about the above mentioned research questions and to identify future research priorities.

## **2. Objectives**

### *2.1 Method*

This review was performed according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines thus providing a comprehensive framework which allows a transparent, complete and accurate reporting of systematic reviews. The PRISMA statement, published in 2009, was designed to help systematic reviewers transparently report why the review was done, what the authors did, and what they found. The PRISMA 2020 statement replaces the 2009 statement and includes new reporting guidance that reflects advances in methods to identify, select, appraise, and synthesise studies (Page *et al.*, 2021).

### *2.2 Eligibility Criteria*

All studies investigating the issues of fairness and equity in the field of educational assessment were eligible for this systematic review. Further criteria adopted were: (i) publication date between 2001 and 2021, (ii) being a theoretical or empirical study about student learning assessment, (iii) written in English, Italian or Spanish language, (iv) published in a scholarly peer-reviewed journal, (v) covering educational levels from primary school to university. Additionally, studies were excluded from review if they were: (i) concerned with other forms of assessment (i.e. teacher evaluation, school evaluation/accountability or course accreditation), (ii) focused on equity/fairness in education in general (and not specifically about assessment).

### *2.3 Information Sources and Search*

Studies were identified by searching relevant papers via EBSCO (2001-2021) and included the following electronic databases: ERIC and Education

Source. Finally, reference lists of retrieved studies were hand searched in order to identify any additional relevant studies.

Key words and combination of key words were used to search the electronic databases (“fairness” AND “equity” AND “educational assessment”, “fair assessment” OR “equitable assessment”).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Study selection

This review identified 667 studies after the initial search in the aforementioned databases and five ( $n = 5$ ) retrieved from a list of references contained in other studies with a total of 672 studies that were included in the identification process. A total of 44 studies has been excluded before screening. The screening phase involved the examination of titles and abstracts of 628 studies. This process resulted in 549 studies being excluded, as they were deemed not suitable for the present review (mainly because not published in a peer-reviewed journal, not written in Italian/English/Spanish, and for not sufficient analysis of the review’ main topics). Consequently, 79 studies were selected for the eligibility phase. Full texts of all potentially relevant studies were subsequently retrieved and further examined for eligibility. Out of these, 26 studies were excluded because they were studies not focused on student learning assessment and 21 because they were not exclusively dealing with assessment but with educational processes in general. Six articles did not directly contribute to the research questions and were therefore excluded.

Following this procedure, 26 theoretical and empirical studies fully met the previously stipulated eligibility criteria for inclusion in the systematic review process. The PRISMA flow diagram (see Fig. 1) provides more detailed information regarding the selection process of studies.

In this section, the results found through the aforementioned systematic revision process are organized according to the research questions that guided the search and analysis.

A first noteworthy aspect concerns the overlapping use of three words, i.e. *fairness*, *equity*, *justice*. The first two are used interchangeably, while justice is used in those studies that propose a general and broader reflection about the issue. Another noteworthy issue concerns the presence of the word “*diversity*” in studies concerning fair/equitable assessment. The following paragraphs will show also the connection between diversity and equity/fairness issues.

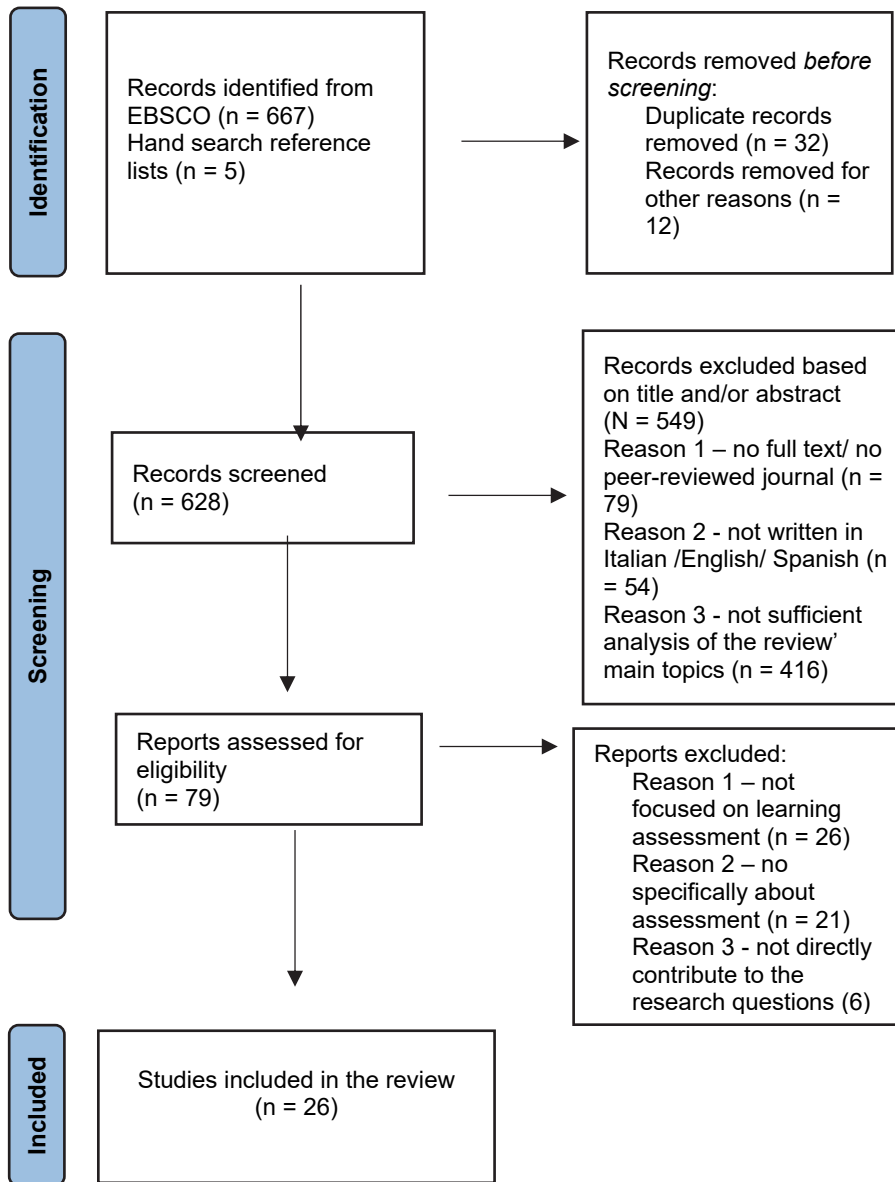


Fig.1 - The PRISMA flow diagram

### 3.2 Equity and fairness in assessment

1. What does it mean to rethink assessment through the lens of justice? And specifically, how can “fair (or equitable) assessment” be defined?

Several papers allow to answer to this first question. In particular, literature reveals that fairness is considered a complex issue and “*a multifaceted quality in classroom assessment that aims to support learning*” (Tierney, 2014, p. 55). Qualities that are desirable for educational assessment are usually identified as validity and reliability, but much less focuses on fairness. It emerges that the meaning of fairness continues to evolve. Literature about testing and educational measurement shows that during the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, many measurement professionals began to focus on test and item fairness giving life to a period of intense interest in fairness research. Researchers produced statistical models and procedures to identify test questions that might be unfair, but it was with the publication of the third edition of Educational Measurement that the emphasis on the relationship between fairness and validity has become a hallmark of current thinking on fairness (Cole and Zieky, 2001) establishing a linkage between fairness and validity. The terms *biased* and *unfair* were used interchangeably, while now the discourse about fairness seems to go beyond the technical issues of bias, covering a broader social concern (Stobart, 2005, Tierney, 2014). In fact an examination of the studies reveals that the discourse on fairness is grounded in the issue of social justice. The article by McArthur (2016) provides a rationale for *assessment for social justice*. The author refers to two concepts, the first one connected to an intrinsic characteristic of the assessment process, while in the other one the issue of justice is considered as a goal to be reached through the mediation of the assessment process. So, in the first case we could speak about the *justice of assessment* (for example, the justice of summative assessment based solely on a traditional examination, the extent to which group work marks reflect individual as well as joint student effort), and a second level of reflection concerns the role of assessment in nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society (for example, the integration of ethical and technical know-how, abilities to understand multiple perspectives and a professional commitment to ongoing learning). Considering these issues allows to reflect upon: ‘what is a fair assessment’ (and when an assessment process/practice is fair?) as well as ‘how could an assessment process/practice be developed to achieve justice?’.

Similar studies (Stowell, 2004; Nguyen and Walker, 2015; Hidalgo, Murillo, 2016; Macfarlane, 2016; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016; Hanesworth *et al.*, 2019; Florez *et al.*, 2018) explore the concept of social justice and its implications for assessment. Social justice is understood as expanding both

student opportunities for individual well-being, but also the development of key capabilities and agency to advance the common and social good. These studies try to go beyond a technical perspective, looking at whether assessment is efficient, reliable, valid, and so on. The focus is on what can be called a “humanistic perspective” (Nguyen and Walker, 2015) that highlights assessment to foster learning for ‘human flourishing’ and responsibility to society, bridging the literatures of human capabilities (Sen, 1999), sustainable assessment for lifelong learning (Boud, 2000), Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP, Paris, 2012) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL, CAST 2011) in order to produce a new imaginary for approaches to assessment with a greater focus on the issue of justice.

It implies a greater attention to the concept of *diversity*, and in particular to such input variables (the so called ‘access questions’) that students bring to academic settings as prior knowledge and experiences, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, educational resources available to them, their cultural ways of engaging and communicating, learning profiles, interests and passions, their readiness, their emotional language and life stories (Tomlinson, Moon, 2013; Phuong *et al.*, 2017). The discourse on diversity in educational contexts emphasizes the heterogeneity of learners and takes diversity as the starting point for educational theory and practice. According to this interpretation, assessment is understood as a non-categorical, all-embracing approach in which individual differences are not classified (Tierney, 2014). When incorporating these discourses in assessment, literature suggests avoiding tendencies towards essentialising group and individual experiences since this can lead to misdirected deficit notions of difference. This occurs, for instance, when the focus on redressing inequities of assessment outcomes lies solely on an erroneously homogenised subset of learners rather than the systematic processes underpinning practice (Hanesworth *et al.*, 2019). A social justice approach to assessment is at once *universal* and *anticipatory* while responsive to individual learning requirements. It means embedding diversity *at point-of-design* and expanding opportunities for justice and equity through three principles of curriculum design: (i) provide multiple means of representation; (ii) provide multiple means of action and expression; and (iii) provide multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2011). The complexity of these concepts defies simple solutions: with the diversity of learners in classrooms, the multiple purposes of educational assessment, and the variety of circumstances that arise in assessing learning, there are no ‘*one-size-fits-all*’ answers for fairness.

A possible *anticipatory* answer consists in designing out barriers to access and participation. A study by Graham *et al.* (2018) highlights how an assessment task design can inadvertently create barriers and consequently reduce the opportunity to access and participate in the assessment practice

itself. By analysing sample assessment tasks, the authors focused on three types of complexity: *visual* (making it harder for students to distinguish between important and unimportant information), *procedural* complexity (as in the number of elements that students are required to incorporate to meet the assessment criteria, and consider how poor alignment between these elements may make the task more difficult than it needs to be) and *linguistic* complexity (or the language that is being used in the task sheet, and contemplate the barriers that this language may create). The results highlight the ‘a priori importance of accessibility’ giving attention to a driving question: *Is the purpose of the assessment to grade students on their ability to decipher the assessment task sheet OR is the purpose to provide an opportunity for students to relay what they know and have learned?*

An empirical study (Heritage and Wylie, 2018) uses a practice-based example to illustrate the benefits of AfL to student learning, to students’ identities and to equity in the classroom. Mathematics lesson and post-lesson conversations with the teacher were examined. Results about equity show that equity in mathematics learning occurs when teachers ensure that every student has opportunities to engage in challenging learning and develop proficiency in working collaboratively with peers to solve challenging problems, along with a strong sense of personal agency and identity. The case study demonstrated that AfL can function as a primary vehicle in ensuring these equity goals since each child was able to engage in challenging mathematics, matched to the “edge” of their learning, and also to develop skills in working collaboratively. Students were treated as agents in their own mathematics learning and regarded as intellectual resources for each other through engaging in discourse and peer feedback.

Specifically, about definitions of fair/equitable assessment, the dictionary definition suggests that when something is fair/equitable is marked by impartiality or honesty, and free from self-interest, prejudice, or favouritism (i.e. fair play). Moreover, the opposite of fair is *biased* (an unbiased report takes a neutral stance, and an unbiased jury remains objective). So there is a sense of being between extremes, or balanced like when we say ‘fair weather’ (that is pleasant, meaning neither too hot nor too cold). Despite what appears to be a multiplicity of definitions, common use of the word fair generally conveys a sense of openness, neutrality, or balance (Tierney, 2013). When considering the word equity, the dictionary offers a similar definition, i.e. the quality of being fair and impartial.

Willis *et al.* (2013) connect fairness and equity with the discourse about the students’ rights. Assessment practices that strive to achieve fairer and more equitable outcomes for all students are to be strongly linked to a pedagogy focused on protecting all students’ rights to opportunities to learn, progress and



succeed. This is in line with Elwood and Lundy (2010) sustaining that a valid and equitable assessment is a child's right that implies "equality of opportunity for all, without discrimination on any grounds" (p. 345).

Klenowski (2012, 2014) suggest a twofold perspective, that is to consider the opportunity to participate in learning (access issues) and the opportunity to demonstrate learning: both are deemed fundamental factors to define a fair assessment. It requires teachers and systems to move beyond the technical definition of a concern with test construction to a more encompassing view of what precedes an assessment (the assessment design phase in which access and resources need to be considered) and of its consequences (for example, interpretations of results and impact).

Other authors, like Stobart (2005), agree about the concern that fairness is fundamentally a *sociocultural*, rather than a technical, issue. Fair assessment cannot be considered in isolation from both the curriculum and the educational opportunities of the students.

In line with moving beyond the technical aspects related to fairness, Tierney (2014) sustains that the discourse of fairness in assessment is also connected to the ethics of teaching. Fairness is an essential quality of both individuals and interactions in the classroom, and it is closely associated with teaching ethos and other moral qualities such as honesty and respect. As such, fairness is seen to be in the hands of teachers, with varying degrees of ethical awareness, who strongly influence the quality of students' opportunities to learn.

### 3.3 *The students' point of view about fairness and equity in assessment*

- When an assessment process or practice is fair/equitable from the students' perspective?

The second research question aims at highlighting the students' perspective about the investigated issue.

A review by Struyven *et al.* (2005) reveals that from university students' points of view, assessment has a positive effect on their learning and is 'fair' when it: (1) relates to authentic tasks; (2) represents reasonable demands; (3) encourages them to apply knowledge to realistic contexts; (4) emphasizes the need to develop a range of skills; and (5) is perceived to have long-term benefits. Alternative assessment practices (self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolio) are perceived as characterized by these qualities and students report these modes help them to learn in a more in-depth way. Also the lack of control over the evaluation process and the feeling that examinations checked solely the quality of student's notes and the lecturer's handouts, were both considered important arguments for students to believe traditional assessment is an unfair measure of learning.

Results of a study about university students' perceptions (Lizzio *et al.*, 2007) show the contribution of a fair assessment to the perception of a fair academic environment. The authors found a factor that reflected students' concerns about fair assessment (*'Methods of assessment give students a fair opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of a subject'*), the transparency and objectivity (*'Students are assessed on clear and objective criteria'*) and the comparative equity (*'Rules and procedures are applied consistently and fairly'*) of the learning and assessment process.

Other relevant studies (Pepper and Pathak, 2008; Scott *et al.*, 2014; Flores *et al.*, 2015; Murillo & Hidalgo, 2017) show that students give great attention to some aspects when defining an assessment as fair: 1) explicitness in grading criteria, 2) frequent feedback, 3) assessment capacity to meet the characteristics of each student, 4) equality for all in terms of conditions and support, 5) participation in the assessment process, 6) focus on the effort and the progress (not just the results), 7) continuity and flexibility, 8) attention to aspects not strictly related to learning, such as their attitude, empathy, respect for peers, 9) learner-centred approach to assessment.

An interesting study by Burger (2017) contrasts essays and examinations as two rather different approaches to evaluating university students' performance, which has consequences for attitudes toward the assessment process. The aim was to explore students' perspective about the fairness of the assessment process and results recommend an increase in the proportion of essays to improve justice climate even if attention has to be given to the issue of grading to mitigate validity-related concerns. Therefore, attempts to reduce feelings of injustice by prioritizing essay-based assessment can only be successful if they are accompanied by measures that ensure that quality feedback and transparency is maintained.

A study by Pitt and Winstone (2018) investigates the role of anonymous marking on university students' perceptions of fairness by exploring whether students perceive anonymous marking as fairer than non-anonymous marking. Each student experienced both anonymous and non-anonymous marking of summative assessments within their programme of study during one semester. Students were asked to complete a survey relating to their experiences of both anonymised and non-anonymised marking and feedback by rating (among other aspects) their perceptions of the marking process (bias, fairness, transparency and confidence in the process). Results revealed no significant difference in perceptions of fairness according to whether or not marking was anonymous. The study suggests to seriously question whether transparency and equity require anonymous marking and to distinguish between anonymous grading and anonymous feedback (Whitelegg, 2002): whilst anonymous grading has clear advantages (such as removal of bias/prejudgement), the

provision of feedback on an anonymous basis is potentially problematic because it disrupts the feedback loop by removing the individualisation of feedback comments, increasing the distance between staff and students.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The present review aimed to identify relevant aspects connected with equity and fairness issues in the field of students' learning assessment. As the findings from the current literature review indicate, assessment strategies that are more fair or responsive to differences are needed, and it is possible to identify two key factors representing future research priorities.

1. *Fairness and equity between cultures and practices.* On one side the discourse of how the teachers could *be* fair in their professional experience, and on the other side the fact that a practice has to be fair: one focusing on the ethics of teaching (values and cultures) and the other on assessment practices. From the first perspective, being fair or equitable means being neutral or balanced in the treatment or in the judgement. This is a complex issue because it could be misinterpreted to mean using the same treatment for all of the students in the classroom (but equitable is different from equal). Treating students equally may give the appearance of neutrality (and avoiding favouritism is one definition of fair), but it results in the problem that essentially, when equal treatment is highly valued, the appropriateness of an assessment is compromised for some students (Tierney, 2013). On the side of the practices, it is clear from the examined literature that certain actions relating to transparency, plurality of students' opportunities to learn and express learning (according to a universal design approach where greater choice for students is associated with increased agency) and the attention to the classroom environment and to a participatory approach can lead to fairer assessment.
2. *Addressing diversity.* The question is: How to meet the diverse students' characteristics, profiles, backgrounds and so on? Doing something for some students and something different for others? Or providing multiple options to participate and learn by offering flexibility and choice? Literature reveals the importance of moving away from a *model of adjustments*, which makes specific retrospective reasonable accommodations for a small number of students with specific characteristics towards assessment models that allow all students to fully participate and learn in the most equitable way (for example increasing accessibility and participation avoiding unnecessary barriers in the task design phase as well as developing flexible assessment settings and formats in which the capacity to evaluate options and make

choices is stimulated) in order to achieve justice and to allow diversity to flourish. The Capability Approach could offer a significant contribution to design an assessment culture and practice with an embedded focus on equity.

Future studies need to investigate deeply on these aspects by increasing research on students' and teachers' perceptions about fairness in assessment. Moreover, the review revealed an increased focus on discussing equity in assessment, with increases in publications on the topic across the higher education sector. What has become evident is the need for considering these issues also in school context.

*"We will never achieve fair assessment, but we can make it fairer: "The best defence against inequitable assessment is openness. Openness about design, constructs and scoring, will bring out into the open the values and biases of the test design process, offer an opportunity for debate about cultural and social influences, and open up the relationship between assessor and learner. These developments are possible, but they do require political will". (Gipps, 1999, in Stobart, 2005, p. 285).*

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