

EDITORIAL

Val Klenowski

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Concerns for equity, fairness, and inclusion in assessment continue to be key areas of research interest, particularly during these times of heightened accountability and testing. Internationally, the increased diversity of the student population in cultural and economic status terms has brought issues of equity to the fore. In education, equity refers to fairness and inclusion. Often, these terms are used interchangeably. Fairness is understood to relate to personal and social circumstances, such as gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnic origin, which should not be a barrier to achieving educational potential. Inclusion refers to ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all. In this special issue of *Assessment Matters* these concepts of equity, fairness, and inclusion are explored and discussed in six different educational contexts of Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand.

The articles are based on research findings, or syntheses of findings, from a number of research projects, conducted for different purposes and varied in their theoretical perspectives and methodology. Each article provides a unique perspective on concerns relevant to fair assessment in a particular educational and cultural context. This special issue aims to contribute as a collective, and individually, to existing knowledge about fairness in assessment. It will be no surprise to read that many of the articles refer to the work of Gipps and Stobart (2009) and build on their argument that assessment needs to take account of social contexts and consider fairness as more than “a technical concern with test construction” (p. 105). The contributing authors to this issue agree that fairness in assessment involves issues of access and resources prior to assessment, and consequences including interpretations of results and impact, as well as the assessment design itself.

Many teachers at some stage in their career have faced the dilemma of whether to alter a student’s grade for a particular reason. Robin Tierney

explores this moral and ethical issue in “Altered Grades: A Grey Zone in the Ethics of Classroom Assessment”. Some would argue that the alteration of students’ grades is justified because it relates to fairness. In this interesting examination of eight instances where experienced teachers altered, or were asked to alter, students’ grades in secondary schools in Ontario, Canada, Tierney focuses on the circumstances and motives for grade alteration. She discusses the moral complexity and the ethical dilemmas that teachers confront in assessment practice. Teachers reported that the changes to grades were carried out for reasons of compassion, to provide students with opportunity, or to teach life lessons.

Kelvin Tan and Charles Deneen explore the concept of fairness in terms of educational opportunity and outcomes in the context of the meritocratic system of Singapore. These authors make explicit the tension(s) between meritocracy’s egalitarian and elitist strands, and they draw parallels with assessment practice in schools. Two conflicting notions of fairness are identified, and the dialectic tension and relationship(s) between each are explored. “Holistic assessment” as opposed to “bite-sized assessment” in Singaporean primary schools is discussed in relation to validity and fairness in school assessment, with the goal of preparing students as future citizens capable of participating fully in meritocratic discourse in society. Assessment issues pertaining to validity are identified as early purveyors of merit determination.

Hong Kong is a predominantly Chinese society, but just over 6 percent of the population is made up of ethnic minorities. Kerry Kennedy, Ming-Tak Hue, and Miron Kumar Bhowmik consider this composition in schools where teachers cater for a diverse school population. The study on which the article is based was designed to investigate whether assessment environments in Hong Kong schools cater for the learning motivation of ethnic minority students as well as their Chinese peers. Most often both groups experience teacher dominated assessment environments with each group supportive of learning motivation goals of academic development. Ethnic minority students appear to support social-learning goals more strongly than their Chinese peers. The study highlights how teachers, when addressing issues of fairness, can build on ethnic minority students’ strong learning orientation by providing high-quality feedback even in a teacher-dominated assessment environment. These authors conclude that

a more interactive classroom, characterised by feedback, may provide teachers with a better idea of the learning needs of all students.

Assessment conceptualised as social practice is explored in Val Klenowski's article, written to address issues related to fairness and equity. She suggests that collaborative enquiry conducted by researchers, parents, students, and Aboriginal education workers together can support the development of fair assessment practice. Klenowski synthesises findings from three research projects. The first was a summative evaluation of a major Indigenous schooling reform initiative. The remaining two were Australian Research Council Linkage projects—one sought to explore ways to improve equity and ethical leadership, and the other explored learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through fairer assessment practices. From the project findings, Klenowski suggests that when assessment is conceptualised as a social practice it provides a window on how to develop generative approaches to promote learning for all students. In particular she uses the processes involved in personalised learning planning to illustrate this conceptualisation of assessment and how it represents fair assessment.

Despite recognition of gifted and talented (G&T) students within inclusion policies these students' particular needs are frequently neglected or ignored because of the view that these students will thrive regardless of the classroom or school environment. Shelleyann Scott and Donald Scott, in "Fairness and Equity for the Gifted and Talented Student: Exploring Differentiated Assessment", provide definitions of fairness and equity and common identifying characteristics of G&T students. Scott and Scott discuss key emergent issues of teacher control versus freedom for students, and curricula decisions such as providing accelerated curriculum and assessments, and greater complexity and challenge. Differentiated assessment for G&T students that involves different assessment types and features (for multiple opportunities and variety in assessments, and performance-based and authentic assessments) are also considered. In terms of assessment and fairness, these authors helpfully provide focus questions educators can use to interrogate personal beliefs about, and commitment to, G&T students.

In New Zealand, family and whānau can play a productive role in assessment, but this requires teachers to establish relationships that facilitate the reciprocal exchange of information for the benefit of student learning. In “Equity as Family/ Whānau Opportunities for Participation in Formative Assessment” Bronwen Cowie and Linda Mitchell explore the extent to which teachers achieve an exchange of information for and with different students and their families as a matter of fairness and equity. They argue that equitable parental participation in formative assessment relies on a family being able to access information about their child’s learning in forms they can understand and act on. Cowie and Mitchell outline the implications of differences in the opportunities families have to share what they know about their child’s interests, strengths, and needs as part of a reciprocal exchange of information.

It is important to recognise that in each of these articles questions of validity are raised. As identified by Crooks, Kane and Cohen (1996), “[v]alidity is the most important quality of an assessment, but its evaluation is often neglected” (p. 265). The evaluation of validity requires a careful understanding and consideration of the threats to validity (Crooks et al., 1996). The articles in this special issue bring to the fore some of these threats associated particularly with the assessment stages of evaluation, decision, and impact. In addition, in terms of the assessment stage of administration of the assessment, the threats to validity are identified to ensure that conditions are fair and that students are well motivated.

References

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