

Conference Theme (2019)

Assessment for transformation: teaching, learning and improving educational outcomes

The 2019 conference theme might be seen as a continuity of the theme for 2018 and embraces not necessarily new perspectives on approaches to student assessment but aims to emphasize assessment as a tool that can play a relevant role in transforming the ways students are taught, the ways they develop as learners and, furthermore, that can contribute to high quality educational outcomes around the world.

We as an association would argue that assessment, either within classroom or applied in an external context, is absolutely necessary to regulate and to inform teachers, families, students and politicians, as well as educational researchers, about the way teaching and learning processes can improve. Assessment can be used mostly for formative purposes but it can also have summative aims, or a combination of both; it can assume the form of tests or exams, but can also be based on more creative and rich formats, i.e., portfolios, debates, reports, essays, collaborative tasks, among others. Moreover, for the past two decades, within many educational systems, we have witnessed the reshaping of assessment, through the emergence of more digital assessment contexts and platforms.

Despite all these opportunities and options, assessment remains a powerful tool to enhance quality education and improve student outcomes. While considering that the purpose and validity of assessment should be guiding influences to be followed at all times, in most educational systems we still face the effect of the dominance of testing. Many of the well-known, negative impacts of exams and summative assessment in classroom environments still remain, affecting the way teachers teach and students learn; valuing a mostly 'teaching to the test/learning to the test' approach that can lead to shallow learning outcomes, which in part might explain the results that some countries show in international students' assessment programmes, like PISA, PIRLS or TIMSS. This widespread approach is preventing students, especially those who are socially most vulnerable, from experiencing opportunities for optimal learning and, therefore, compromising the quality of education and the role that assessment can play, in the broadest sense, to achieving success for future generations, in a sustainable way.

Transformation must emphasize the relevance of quality and sustainable feedback. Although feedback is traditionally linked to the formative dimension of classroom assessment, it is fundamentally important that we start associating feedback with other assessment contexts. Low-stakes external assessment is one, but reporting results of summative external assessment should also be regarded as an opportunity for a positive "washback effect" insofar as the results should allow for the improvement of teaching and learning for future students cohorts. Last but not least, digital assessment should be seen as, not as a means in itself, but as a way to facilitate this new approach to our schools and educational systems as a whole.

The centrality of assessment in education is something that we as educational assessment researchers recognize as a value that we must preserve. Therefore it is our common responsibility to be able to transform assessment for the better, whether we talk about its purposes, about the instruments we use or the way outcomes are reported, analysed and eventually used to (re)shape teaching and learning. We need to do so in ways that will create sustainable learning cultures that will lead to educational success. We must remember that education is an open system, in which other stakeholders, like parents and opinion makers, journalists and politicians, all play a relevant role, despite not being, for the most part, technically aware of the best options to promote educational success; very often thinking that replicating the «school» they attended some decades ago is the best solution for their children.

Bearing this in mind, changes in approaches to teaching, learning and assessment must prove to be fit for purpose, show effective positive results and clearly be seen, by those key stakeholders immediately outside the educational assessment environment, as the route to be followed.