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Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 12 May 2023
Revised 10 June 2023
Accepted 22 June 2023
Published online 01 July 2023

How to cite this article:

Rastegar, B., & Salavati, M. (2023). Perceived Factors Influencing the Equity of Assessment in Inclusive Secondary Classrooms. *Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences*, 1(3), 29-37.
<https://doi.org/10.61838/japes.1.3.4>

Perceived Factors Influencing the Equity of Assessment in Inclusive Secondary Classrooms

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the perceived factors influencing the equity of assessment practices in inclusive secondary classrooms from the perspective of teachers. A qualitative research design was employed to investigate teachers' experiences with inclusive assessment. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 secondary school teachers from inclusive classrooms in Tehran, selected using purposive sampling. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interview protocol focused on pedagogical strategies, institutional constraints, and socio-emotional dynamics related to assessment equity. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Nvivo software was utilized to manage, organize, and code the data systematically. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) pedagogical and instructional factors, (2) institutional and policy constraints, and (3) socio-emotional and cultural dynamics. Subthemes included differentiated assessment strategies, clarity of criteria, feedback practices, standardized testing pressures, limited professional development, and the emotional impact of assessment on learners. Teachers reported tensions between inclusive intentions and systemic constraints, such as national exams, resource shortages, and ambiguous policies. While some educators adopted student-centered, culturally responsive practices, others struggled due to inadequate support and ingrained deficit beliefs. Participants emphasized the role of student agency, emotional safety, and teacher mindset in promoting assessment equity. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of assessment equity in inclusive classrooms, shaped by intersecting pedagogical, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. To support equitable assessment, systemic reforms are needed, including improved teacher training, flexible assessment policies, and greater incorporation of student voice. Addressing these challenges is essential for realizing the full potential of inclusive education and ensuring that all learners can demonstrate their knowledge in fair and meaningful ways.

Keywords: assessment equity, inclusive education, secondary classrooms, teacher perception, qualitative research, differentiated assessment, formative feedback, Universal Design for Learning

Introduction

In recent decades, inclusive education has emerged as a guiding framework in global efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, particularly those with diverse needs and abilities (UNESCO, 2020). As schools increasingly embrace inclusive pedagogies, the question of how assessment practices align with the principles of equity and inclusion has become a critical area of inquiry. Assessment in inclusive classrooms must reflect not only students' cognitive outcomes but also their individual learning profiles, socio-cultural contexts, and diverse modes of expression (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Despite policy advances advocating for inclusive education, persistent inequities in assessment continue to disproportionately

affect learners with disabilities, language minorities, and students from marginalized backgrounds (Brookhart, 2011; DeLuca, LaPointe-McEwan, & Luhanga, 2016). These disparities raise essential questions about how equity is conceptualized and operationalized within secondary school assessment practices.

Equity in educational assessment refers to the degree to which assessment systems and practices provide fair opportunities for all students to demonstrate their learning, irrespective of individual differences (Tierney, 2013). In inclusive secondary classrooms—characterized by heterogeneous student populations—achieving equitable assessment is inherently complex. It requires teachers to navigate competing demands of curriculum standards, high-stakes testing, and the diverse needs of learners with varying levels of ability, language proficiency, and social-emotional development (Klenowski, 2014). Research indicates that conventional assessment systems, which often prioritize standardization and norm-referenced outcomes, tend to overlook the variability of learners in inclusive settings (Volante & Fazio, 2007). This creates systemic barriers that not only distort student performance but also influence teachers' instructional decisions and expectations (Looney, 2011).

Inclusive assessment goes beyond simply providing accommodations. It involves designing assessments that are culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), ensuring that all learners have meaningful access to demonstrate what they know (CAST, 2018). Yet, numerous studies have highlighted that while inclusive pedagogies may be embraced at the instructional level, assessment practices often lag behind in achieving similar levels of transformation (Flórez Petour, 2021; DeLuca et al., 2016). Teachers frequently report challenges in reconciling the need for individualized assessment with institutional mandates for standardized testing and uniform grading policies (Kane, 2013). These tensions are particularly pronounced in secondary classrooms where accountability pressures are high, and where assessment outcomes significantly influence students' academic trajectories (Brookhart, 2017).

The concept of assessment equity also intersects with broader sociocultural and policy dimensions. For instance, the design and implementation of assessment tools often reflect dominant cultural norms and linguistic assumptions, which may disadvantage students from minority or immigrant backgrounds (Heitink et al., 2016). In multilingual classrooms, students' ability to comprehend test instructions or express their understanding can be impeded by language barriers, thereby skewing results and reinforcing educational disparities (Abedi, 2010). Moreover, equity is influenced by the extent to which students' voices are incorporated into the assessment process. Studies have shown that when students are given opportunities to participate in co-constructing assessment criteria or engage in self- and peer-assessment, their sense of agency and fairness increases (Harris & Brown, 2013). However, in many secondary schools, assessment continues to be driven by top-down models that prioritize summative outcomes over formative and participatory approaches (OECD, 2013).

Teacher beliefs and attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping assessment practices. Educators' perceptions of student ability, fairness, and accountability directly influence how they design, administer, and interpret assessments (Torrance, 2012). For example, deficit-oriented beliefs about students with disabilities or those from low socioeconomic backgrounds can lead to lower expectations and reduced opportunities for meaningful assessment engagement (Black & Wiliam, 2009). On the other hand, teachers who adopt inclusive and growth-oriented mindsets are more likely to implement assessment modifications that support diverse learners (Tomlinson, 2014). Nonetheless, teachers often report feeling ill-equipped to design equitable assessments due to limited professional development, lack of institutional support, and ambiguous policy guidelines (DeLuca et al., 2016). These systemic constraints underscore the need for both structural and pedagogical reforms.

Equity in assessment is also deeply connected to emotional and psychological dimensions of the learning process. Research has shown that students' perceptions of fairness in assessment affect their motivation, self-esteem, and engagement (Klinger, Volante, & Deluca, 2012). In inclusive classrooms, students who consistently experience assessment as a source of stress, failure, or marginalization may disengage from learning altogether. This is particularly true for students with learning

disabilities or emotional-behavioral challenges, for whom traditional assessment formats often exacerbate anxiety and self-doubt (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). In contrast, when assessment is perceived as supportive, transparent, and reflective of individual effort, it can serve as a powerful tool for fostering resilience and academic confidence (Gipps & Stobart, 2009).

From a policy standpoint, most educational systems—including Iran—have made formal commitments to inclusive education, yet concrete guidelines on inclusive assessment remain limited or inconsistently applied (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers in Iranian secondary schools face the dual challenge of aligning their practices with both national assessment standards and the diverse needs of students in inclusive settings. Existing research in the Iranian context suggests that while inclusive education has gained traction in policy discourse, practical implementation, especially in assessment, remains fragmented and often contradictory (Bagherian & Naderi, 2021). Teachers frequently report confusion over what constitutes acceptable assessment modification, lack of resources for differentiated assessment, and insufficient institutional recognition of inclusive assessment efforts.

This gap between policy and practice highlights the need for empirical investigations into how assessment equity is experienced and enacted by educators in inclusive classrooms. While much of the literature on inclusive assessment focuses on primary education or higher education, secondary classrooms occupy a unique and underexplored space. Adolescents face increased academic pressure, heightened peer comparison, and standardized credentialing systems that shape their future opportunities (Klenowski, 2014). Understanding how equity in assessment is negotiated in this context is essential for developing policies and practices that truly support inclusive learning.

Given this background, the present study seeks to explore the perceived factors that influence assessment equity in inclusive secondary classrooms in Tehran. Specifically, it aims to examine how teachers navigate the pedagogical, institutional, and socio-emotional dimensions of inclusive assessment, and what strategies they employ to foster fairness and responsiveness in their evaluative practices. Using a qualitative methodology, this study foregrounds the voices of educators who operate at the frontline of inclusion, offering nuanced insights into the daily realities, tensions, and innovations that shape equitable assessment in practice.

By centering teachers' lived experiences, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship advocating for inclusive, just, and context-sensitive assessment systems. It also provides practical implications for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher education programs aiming to bridge the gap between the ideals of assessment equity and the constraints of current educational structures.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceived factors influencing the equity of assessment practices in inclusive secondary classrooms. Given the complexity and contextual nature of equity in educational assessment, a qualitative approach allowed for in-depth investigation of participants' subjective experiences and perceptions. The research utilized a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who had direct experience with inclusive classroom assessment, ensuring that the data collected would be rich and contextually relevant.

A total of 20 participants took part in the study, comprising inclusive education teachers, subject-specific secondary teachers, and school administrators working in inclusive school settings across Tehran. Participants were selected based on their involvement in inclusive teaching practices and their experience in assessment design and implementation for diverse learners.

The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, whereby no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that the interview protocol covered all relevant areas of inquiry. The interview guide included open-ended questions focused on teachers' understanding of assessment equity, their strategies for inclusive evaluation, challenges they encountered, and perceptions of institutional and systemic support. Interviews were conducted in person, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Initial coding was conducted manually and iteratively, followed by categorization of codes into broader themes and subthemes reflecting shared patterns across the dataset. To ensure consistency and rigor in the analysis process, Nvivo qualitative data analysis software was used to manage and organize the codes and themes. Constant comparison techniques were applied throughout to refine categories and validate emerging interpretations. Trustworthiness was established through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Pedagogical and Instructional Factors

Assessment Differentiation Strategies.

Teachers emphasized the importance of designing flexible assessment formats to accommodate a wide range of learner needs. Strategies such as tiered tasks, varied question types, extended time, and options for oral or visual responses were commonly mentioned. As one teacher noted, "I can't use the same test for everyone. Some of my students need visuals or oral presentations instead of written answers." This adaptation allowed for more accurate demonstrations of learning across different ability levels.

Inclusive Curriculum Alignment.

Participants reported a strong need to align assessments with inclusive curricular goals and individualized education programs (IEPs). Some educators indicated that assessments often lacked direct correspondence with what students were being taught. One participant remarked, "The exam sometimes asks things we haven't focused on in class because I was adapting materials for a student with a learning disability. That creates unfairness." Alignment with UDL principles and inclusive objectives was viewed as crucial for equity.

Clarity and Transparency of Assessment Criteria.

Ensuring that students understood the expectations of assessments was another commonly cited factor. Teachers described using rubrics, examples of previous work, and modeling assessment tasks to promote clarity. One participant stated, "We show them what a good answer looks like. Otherwise, some students are lost and just guess." This transparency was particularly vital for students with cognitive or processing difficulties.

Feedback Practices.

Individualized and strengths-based feedback was reported as central to equitable assessment. Teachers described offering private, constructive feedback that highlighted progress rather than focusing solely on deficits. A teacher explained, “I try to show them where they’re improving. Especially for students with special needs, it boosts their confidence to hear what they’re doing right.” Peer feedback was also structured to be supportive and guided.

Classroom Participation Structures.

To create inclusive assessment environments, teachers described adjusting participation methods—such as using visual cues, scaffolded questioning, and response cards—to help all students engage. One interviewee shared, “Some students can’t raise their hand quickly or formulate an answer under pressure. So, I give them alternative ways to respond.” Use of assistive technologies was also mentioned as a strategy for equitable access.

Culturally Responsive Assessment.

Several participants discussed adapting assessments to be culturally relevant and linguistically accessible, especially for students from diverse backgrounds. This included using familiar examples and allowing responses in home languages where possible. One teacher explained, “When I include examples that reflect their culture, students are more engaged and do better. Otherwise, the test feels alien to them.”

Student-Centered Assessment.

Providing students with choice and agency in how they demonstrate learning was viewed as a critical equity enhancer. Teachers allowed students to select between projects, oral reports, or written assignments, and encouraged them to co-create rubrics. A participant emphasized, “Letting them choose how they show what they learned makes a huge difference. They feel more in control and more motivated.”

Theme 2: Institutional and Policy Constraints

Standardized Assessment Pressures.

Teachers widely expressed concern over the constraints imposed by national or school-level standardized exams. These assessments were described as rigid and misaligned with inclusive teaching goals. One teacher commented, “We’re told to individualize our teaching, but then the students all take the same test at the end. It’s contradictory.”

Teacher Workload and Resources.

Limited time, staffing, and materials were recurring challenges. Participants explained that preparing differentiated assessments and individual feedback required significant time, which was often unavailable. “I have 30 students, many with different needs, and no assistant. It’s overwhelming,” one teacher remarked, highlighting the strain of equitable assessment under resource constraints.

Professional Development Gaps.

Teachers reported receiving little or no training specifically focused on inclusive assessment practices. Workshops, when offered, often emphasized theory over practical implementation. One participant stated, “We’re told to be inclusive, but no one teaches us how to design assessments that really work for all students.”

Administrative Expectations.

Several participants felt that school leadership lacked understanding of the complexities of inclusive assessment. Administrative pressure for standardization and data collection was seen as a barrier. A teacher explained, “The administration wants numbers and comparisons, not stories of individual growth. That discourages creative assessment.”

Assessment Policy Ambiguity.

Many interviewees cited unclear or contradictory policies related to inclusive assessment. Inconsistent application of accommodation guidelines, particularly during high-stakes exams, was frequently mentioned. “Sometimes I get permission to modify an exam; other times, I don’t. There’s no clear rule,” one teacher observed.

Technological Limitations.

Although technology had the potential to support equity, its inconsistent availability and teachers’ digital literacy gaps hindered its effectiveness. One participant reported, “Some students have devices at home, others don’t. Even at school, not all classrooms have the same tools. That’s not fair.” Limited access to adaptive software further restricted inclusive assessment innovation.

Theme 3: Socio-Emotional and Cultural Dynamics

Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes.

Participants acknowledged that personal beliefs significantly influenced assessment equity. While some teachers embraced inclusive philosophies, others held deficit-oriented views of student capabilities. One participant reflected, “Some of my colleagues think certain students just can’t succeed, so they don’t bother to adjust assessments.”

Student Self-Perception.

Students’ emotions and self-concept emerged as critical factors. Participants noted that students with disabilities or learning challenges often feared being judged or compared to peers. A teacher shared, “One of my students refused to take part in peer assessment because she said she always feels like the worst in the class.”

Family Involvement and Support.

Parental engagement was uneven, often shaped by cultural misunderstandings or logistical barriers. Teachers described difficulties in communicating with families unfamiliar with assessment systems. “Many parents don’t understand what formative assessment is. They only care about the final grade,” noted one interviewee.

Equity in Peer Interaction.

Classroom social dynamics sometimes undermined equitable assessment, particularly in group tasks. Teachers mentioned instances of students with disabilities being ignored or marginalized. “In group work, the louder kids take over, and others are sidelined. I have to assign roles to make it fair,” one participant explained.

Language and Communication Barriers.

Students from non-dominant language backgrounds often struggled with interpreting test instructions or articulating responses. Teachers expressed concern over the lack of translation support. “I had a student who understood the content but couldn’t express it well in Persian. The test didn’t reflect what he actually knew,” one teacher observed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study revealed three central themes—pedagogical and instructional factors, institutional and policy constraints, and socio-emotional and cultural dynamics—that shape teachers’ perceptions of equity in assessment practices within inclusive secondary classrooms in Tehran. The participants articulated a complex, often contradictory landscape in which efforts to support equity are simultaneously enabled and constrained by systemic conditions, professional beliefs, and student characteristics. These findings shed light on the practical tensions teachers face as they attempt to balance fairness, curricular demands, and the diverse needs of learners.

A key insight from this study was the prioritization of differentiated assessment strategies among educators as a means of ensuring equitable learning opportunities. Participants highlighted the use of tiered assignments, varied response formats, flexible timing, and personalized tasks as central to meeting students’ diverse needs. These practices align with the principles

of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocate for multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression in both instruction and assessment (CAST, 2018). Similar findings have been reported in previous research emphasizing that differentiated assessment is foundational to equity in inclusive education (Tomlinson, 2014; Florian & Spratt, 2013). However, as participants noted, implementing such strategies requires significant time and expertise, often without institutional support or clear guidance, leading to inconsistencies in practice.

Another significant finding was the emphasis on assessment transparency through clear rubrics, modeled expectations, and student-friendly language. Teachers believed that clarity helped reduce anxiety, particularly among students with cognitive or emotional challenges. This resonates with Brookhart's (2017) assertion that clearly communicated assessment criteria increase student confidence and understanding, thereby promoting a greater sense of fairness. The literature supports the notion that when students understand how they are being assessed, they are more likely to perceive the process as just and participatory (Black & Wiliam, 2009). In inclusive classrooms, where learners may already experience marginalization, such transparency becomes even more critical.

Feedback practices also emerged as a core element of equitable assessment, with teachers stressing the value of individualized, growth-focused feedback. These findings reinforce the broader educational discourse that highlights the transformative power of formative feedback in supporting student learning (Harris & Brown, 2013; Klenowski, 2014). Particularly in inclusive contexts, feedback that affirms progress rather than penalizes shortcomings is vital for maintaining student motivation and engagement (Gipps & Stobart, 2009). As one teacher in the study explained, providing strengths-based feedback helped students with disabilities feel seen and capable, counteracting negative self-perceptions fostered by traditional assessment models.

Despite these promising strategies, participants consistently described systemic barriers that undermine assessment equity. Chief among these were standardized testing mandates that enforce uniformity and limit opportunities for flexibility. Teachers expressed frustration that national exams disregarded students' individualized needs, a concern echoed in international literature highlighting the incompatibility between high-stakes testing and inclusive education goals (Volante & Fazio, 2007; Kane, 2013). Standardized assessments often fail to capture the nuanced progress of students with learning differences and may disproportionately penalize those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Abedi, 2010; Heitink et al., 2016). This tension between policy and practice was particularly acute in secondary settings, where exam results have direct implications for students' educational futures.

Resource constraints—including teacher workload, class size, and lack of co-teaching or technological supports—further impeded efforts to enact equitable assessments. Participants emphasized that differentiated assessment was often sacrificed due to time limitations and the absence of practical resources. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices is heavily dependent on institutional support (Looney, 2011; DeLuca et al., 2016). Without adequate training and collaborative structures, even the most committed teachers struggle to operationalize equity in their classrooms.

Inadequate professional development also emerged as a critical challenge. Teachers reported limited access to training focused on inclusive assessment, with existing workshops described as overly theoretical and lacking relevance to their classroom realities. This reflects earlier research indicating that teacher preparation programs and in-service training frequently neglect assessment literacy, especially in inclusive education contexts (Brookhart, 2011; Klinger, Volante, & DeLuca, 2012). Building assessment literacy is essential not only for technical proficiency but also for fostering reflective practices that critically engage with notions of fairness and justice (Tierney, 2013).

Socio-emotional and cultural factors added further complexity to the assessment process. Teachers identified student anxiety, peer dynamics, and family expectations as significant influences on assessment equity. In particular, the emotional burden of being assessed was described as more pronounced among students with disabilities or those from minority backgrounds, who often feared judgment or failure. These findings echo Ecclestone and Hayes' (2009) argument that assessment, when perceived as punitive or exclusionary, can damage students' emotional well-being and reduce engagement. Conversely, when students experience assessment as affirming and empowering, it can enhance their sense of agency and inclusion (Flórez Petour, 2021).

Teachers' own beliefs and attitudes were revealed to be pivotal in either reinforcing or challenging assessment inequities. While some participants demonstrated strong inclusive values, others reflected deficit-oriented views that may unconsciously limit student opportunities. This duality illustrates the importance of addressing the implicit biases that shape educators' perceptions of fairness and ability (Torrance, 2012; Tomlinson, 2014). Interventions that support critical reflection and inclusive mindsets are therefore necessary components of any strategy aimed at promoting assessment equity.

Finally, the findings underscored the marginalization of student voice in assessment design and interpretation. Although some teachers encouraged self-assessment or co-creation of rubrics, such practices were not widely institutionalized. Yet, the inclusion of student perspectives has been shown to improve engagement, ownership, and perceptions of fairness (Harris & Brown, 2013; OECD, 2013). Without mechanisms for authentic student involvement, assessment risks remaining a top-down process that reproduces existing hierarchies.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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