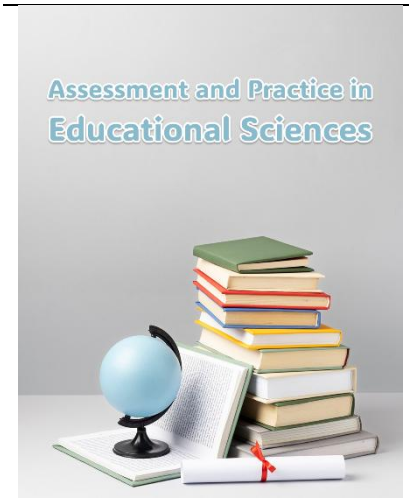
Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences



Investigating the Dimensions of Student Voice in Co-Constructed Assessment Tasks

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the dimensions of student voice as expressed and experienced in the context of co-constructed assessment tasks in secondary educational settings. Using a qualitative research design, this study involved semi-structured interviews with 20 participants (students and teachers) from secondary schools in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in classrooms where assessment tasks were co-designed or collaboratively modified. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Open, axial, and selective coding methods were applied to identify recurring patterns and to develop a framework representing the conceptual dimensions of student voice in co-constructed assessment practices. Thematic analysis yielded three overarching categories: (1) Participation and Agency, which encompassed student decision-making, preference expression, and autonomy in assessment processes; (2) Pedagogical Relationships and Support, which highlighted the importance of trust, teacher responsiveness, and guided scaffolding of student voice; and (3) Impact on Learning and Assessment Practice, which included increased engagement, enhanced assessment literacy, and a cultural shift toward collaborative and reflective assessment environments. Participants reported that co-construction enhanced their motivation, confidence, and metacognitive awareness, though some noted persistent hesitations and unequal participation across student groups. The findings demonstrate that co-constructed assessment tasks provide fertile ground for activating meaningful student voice, particularly when supported by relational pedagogy and inclusive classroom cultures. Integrating student voice into assessment design promotes deeper learning, shared responsibility, and a more democratic approach to evaluation. However, effective implementation requires intentional scaffolding, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing teacher professional development.

Keywords: student voice; co-constructed assessment; participatory assessment; assessment literacy; pedagogical relationships; qualitative research; secondary education.

1. Yasna. Karkhaneh: Department of Educational Counseling, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran. (Email: yasna.karkhaneh84@gmail.com)

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Introduction

The evolving landscape of contemporary education increasingly emphasizes democratic values, student-centered learning, and active engagement of learners in their own educational processes. Within this context, the concept of "student voice" has emerged as a central theme in educational reform and practice. Student voice, broadly understood as the authentic expression and participation of learners in decisions that affect their learning, encompasses a range of participatory practices—from articulating opinions to co-constructing curricula and assessment tasks (Cook-Sather, 2006). Central to this discourse is the belief that including students in educational decision-making processes not only empowers them but also enhances the quality of teaching and learning outcomes (Mitra, 2004).

While considerable scholarly attention has been given to the role of student voice in curriculum development and school governance (Fielding, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2007), its integration into assessment practices remains a relatively underexplored area, especially in terms of co-constructed assessment tasks. Traditional assessment paradigms have been critiqued for positioning students as passive recipients of evaluation, with limited influence over how they are assessed or what counts as evidence of learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Co-constructed assessment, in contrast, involves shared ownership between teachers and students in designing, implementing, and interpreting assessment tasks, thereby fostering an inclusive environment where learners can express agency and take responsibility for their academic development (Harris & Brown, 2013).

The involvement of students in co-constructing assessment is not merely a matter of procedural fairness or inclusion; it has been shown to contribute to deeper learning, increased motivation, and more accurate reflection of students' capacities (Klenowski, 2009). When students participate in setting goals, defining success criteria, and generating feedback, they are more likely to develop metacognitive skills, assessment literacy, and a sense of responsibility toward their learning (Andrade, 2010). Moreover, the co-construction process enables teachers to gain insights into students' perspectives, leading to pedagogical adaptations that better address learners' needs (Willis, Adie, & Klenowski, 2013).

Despite the theoretical promise of student voice in assessment, the practice remains challenging to implement systematically. Many educators struggle with balancing curriculum demands, maintaining assessment validity, and relinquishing control over classroom authority (Brookhart, 2007). Additionally, sociocultural factors—such as power dynamics, language barriers, and teacher-student relationships—can constrain the extent to which students feel empowered to participate in assessment design (Bovill, 2014). Research suggests that student voice initiatives are most effective when embedded within trusting relationships and supportive school cultures that legitimize student perspectives (Levin, 2000; Bragg, 2007). However, such environments are not universally present, particularly in more hierarchical educational systems or classrooms where standardized testing dominates.

Emerging evidence indicates that when students are involved in shaping assessment tasks, the classroom dynamic shifts in meaningful ways. Co-constructed assessment facilitates dialogue between students and teachers, positioning both as collaborators in the learning process (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). This dialogue not only strengthens pedagogical relationships but also helps students develop a clearer understanding of learning expectations and evaluation criteria. According to Sadler (1989), effective formative assessment requires students to understand the standards they are working toward, compare their current performance with these standards, and take action to close the gap—conditions that are more likely to be met when students are involved in assessment design.

In multilingual and multicultural classrooms, the imperative for student voice in assessment becomes even more critical. Students from diverse backgrounds often experience disconnects between their lived experiences and the dominant cultural narratives embedded in standardized assessments (Hill, 2013). Co-constructing assessment tasks offers an avenue to recognize and validate these diverse ways of knowing, thus promoting equity and inclusivity in educational evaluation. This aligns with the work of Paris and Alim (2017), who advocate for culturally sustaining pedagogies that actively seek to affirm students' cultural identities in all aspects of schooling, including assessment.

Nevertheless, gaps remain in the literature regarding how student voice is conceptualized and enacted specifically in the design and negotiation of assessment tasks. Existing studies tend to focus either on general student participation in school life (Lodge, 2005) or on feedback processes rather than on the formative design and co-construction of assessment itself. There is a need to better understand how student voice manifests in concrete classroom assessment practices, what dimensions it entails, and how students and teachers navigate the complexities of shared decision-making in evaluating learning.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the dimensions of student voice in co-constructed assessment tasks, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of students and teachers engaged in such practices. The study adopts a qualitative approach to uncover the nuanced and context-specific ways in which student voice is realized in the co-design of assessments. It explores how students articulate preferences, assume responsibility, negotiate roles, and respond to feedback within the co-construction process. Additionally, it examines how teachers facilitate or hinder these processes through their pedagogical relationships, openness to dialogue, and willingness to adapt their assessment practices.

The study also interrogates the implications of student voice for learning outcomes and classroom culture. By capturing the perspectives of both students and teachers in Tehran-based educational settings, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the enablers and barriers to participatory assessment design. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key dimensions of student voice in co-constructed assessment tasks as perceived by students and teachers?
2. How do pedagogical relationships and classroom culture influence the enactment of student voice in assessment?
3. What impact does student involvement in assessment design have on engagement, learning, and assessment literacy?

By illuminating these dimensions, the study aims to inform the development of more democratic, responsive, and effective assessment practices that honor the agency and expertise of students. In doing so, it contributes to the broader field of assessment for learning and advances the pedagogical imperative to view students not merely as objects of assessment, but as co-creators of their educational journeys.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the dimensions of student voice in co-constructed assessment tasks. The interpretive paradigm guided the research, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and perspectives within their educational contexts. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with assessment practices that involved varying degrees of student input and collaboration.

A total of 20 participants were recruited from secondary schools and educational institutions in Tehran. The sample included a balanced mix of students and teachers actively engaged in co-constructing assessment tasks. Participants were selected based on their familiarity with collaborative assessment methods and their willingness to articulate personal and pedagogical insights related to student voice in such practices.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives about participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections on student voice within the context of co-constructed assessment. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions based on participants’ responses. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet settings conducive to open conversation and lasted between 45 to 75 minutes.

Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—defined as the point at which no new themes or concepts emerged from additional data collection. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach using NVivo software to facilitate the organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data. Transcripts were first subjected to open coding to identify initial concepts and recurring patterns. Axial coding was then used to explore relationships among these codes, leading to the formation of broader thematic categories. Finally, selective coding was conducted to integrate themes into a coherent narrative that captured the dimensions of student voice as expressed by the participants.

Throughout the analytical process, constant comparison techniques were applied to ensure consistency and depth in theme development. Researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing were also employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings and Results

1. Participation and Agency

Participants highlighted various ways in which students were involved in shaping the assessment process. In the shared decision-making subcategory, many students reported having opportunities to contribute to task structure and evaluation criteria. One student explained, “We talked about what a good project should include, and our teacher let us build part of the rubric together.” Teachers confirmed this approach, noting that co-creating rubrics encouraged ownership and fairness.

The expression of preferences was another prominent dimension. Students frequently mentioned choosing formats that suited their learning styles. “I asked to do a video instead of an essay because I express myself better that way,” said one participant. This flexibility was perceived as validating their individuality.

Through negotiation of roles, the boundaries between teacher and student became more dynamic. One teacher noted, “Sometimes I act more as a coach than a judge. Students step in to define what roles they’ll play in group assessments.” This fluidity fostered collaboration rather than compliance.

In terms of autonomy in assessment, students appreciated having control over aspects such as the timing of feedback or peer reviewers. “We were allowed to choose who reviews our work. It made me more open to honest comments,” a student shared. This sense of choice contributed to self-regulation.

The theme of empowerment through voice emerged strongly. Participants often described a sense of increased confidence. “Before, I never thought my opinion mattered in grading. Now I feel like what I say actually shapes what we do,” stated a student.

However, resistance and hesitation were also noted. Some students expressed fear of being wrong or judged. “I didn’t want to speak up because I thought maybe I’d sound stupid,” said one quieter participant. Teachers echoed this, emphasizing the need to create supportive environments.

Finally, the subtheme of inclusive participation pointed to practices ensuring that all students, including less outspoken or linguistically diverse ones, were heard. “Our teacher made sure we could write our ideas first before sharing, so it was easier for shy students,” remarked a student.

2. Pedagogical Relationships and Support

Student voice was also nurtured through the quality of pedagogical relationships. Teacher responsiveness emerged as a critical subcategory. Participants described how teachers modified tasks based on student input. “After we said the task was too difficult, she added an example. It made a big difference,” shared one student.

The presence of trust and psychological safety enabled more open sharing. Students felt encouraged when teachers fostered respectful and nonjudgmental classrooms. One participant said, “You know the teacher won’t laugh or dismiss you, so you feel safe saying what you think.”

Dialogue and reflection characterized the co-construction process. Interviews revealed frequent use of formative conversations. “We talked after the task about what worked and what didn’t. It felt like we were learning together,” noted a student. Teachers described using reflective journals and group dialogues as ongoing assessment practices.

Scaffolding voice was another dimension, with teachers modeling and supporting students’ emerging agency. “At first, she gave us examples of how to suggest changes. Then she let us try,” recalled one participant. This guided independence helped build confidence gradually.

The subtheme of shared goals and values referred to a mutual understanding of why tasks mattered. Both students and teachers emphasized the importance of aligning assessments with personal meaning. “When we decided on the goals together, I cared more about doing well,” one student explained.

3. Impact on Learning and Assessment Practice

The final category focused on how student voice influenced learning outcomes and assessment culture. Enhanced engagement was a recurring theme. Students were more motivated when their voices shaped assessment. “I actually wanted to do my best because it felt like my project, not just something to get a grade,” reported one participant.

Improved learning outcomes were noted by both students and teachers. Participants described gaining deeper understanding and retaining concepts longer. A teacher observed, “Their presentations were stronger because they had a say in the topics. They really connected with the content.”

Students also developed greater assessment literacy through voice-inclusive practices. They better understood rubrics, feedback, and the purpose of evaluation. “Before, I didn’t know what a rubric meant. Now I use it to check my work before submitting,” explained one student.

In the subtheme of feedback utilization, participants described applying peer and teacher feedback more effectively. “I took my friend’s comments and changed my conclusion. It helped a lot,” said one participant. This iterative approach improved both product and process.

Lastly, students and teachers noted a transformation of assessment culture. With student voice, assessment shifted from being anxiety-driven to growth-oriented. “Now assessment feels like a conversation, not a judgment,” shared a student. This transformation contributed to a more positive learning environment and redefined the role of evaluation as a shared journey.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed three major dimensions of student voice in co-constructed assessment tasks: participation and agency, pedagogical relationships and support, and impact on learning and assessment practice. These dimensions not only reflect students’ evolving roles within the classroom but also demonstrate the transformative potential of participatory assessment practices when implemented within trusting and dialogic learning environments.

Students’ involvement in assessment design processes reflected a shift from passive recipients to active contributors. Subthemes such as shared decision-making, expression of preferences, and negotiation of roles highlight how students engaged in co-constructing learning experiences, a finding supported by prior research emphasizing agency as a key pillar of student voice (Mitra, 2004; Fielding, 2004). Students’ ability to influence criteria, formats, and feedback mechanisms echoes Cook-Sather’s (2006) notion of students as “authoritative knowers” of their own learning. Furthermore, students’ reports of increased

motivation and task ownership support Andrade's (2010) assertion that self-assessment and student autonomy improve engagement and performance.

However, the presence of subthemes such as resistance and hesitation indicates that not all students are equally comfortable exercising agency. This finding resonates with Bragg (2007), who noted that structural and psychological factors—such as fear of judgment or internalized roles—can inhibit authentic participation. It is crucial, therefore, to recognize that enabling student voice is not simply a matter of inviting students to participate; it requires a pedagogical commitment to creating inclusive and psychologically safe spaces where all learners feel their voices are valued and respected.

A key finding of this study is the central role of teacher responsiveness and trust in facilitating meaningful student voice. Teachers who modeled openness, encouraged reflective dialogue, and adapted assessment strategies in response to student input were instrumental in building environments where voice could thrive. These findings reinforce the work of Bovill (2014), who emphasized co-creation as a relational rather than procedural endeavor. When students described feeling "safe" or "respected," they were more likely to take intellectual risks, suggest improvements, or critique existing practices—behaviors aligned with the notion of epistemic agency (Damşa et al., 2010).

Subthemes such as scaffolding voice and sharing goals illustrate the importance of structured support in developing students' capacity to co-construct assessment. Students often relied on modeling, prompts, and exemplars before they felt confident making contributions. This aligns with the findings of Harris and Brown (2013), who observed that formative assessment practices are more effective when students are explicitly taught how to engage in them. The interplay between structure and freedom is thus critical: students must first understand the norms of assessment discourse before they can meaningfully reshape it.

Furthermore, mutual respect and open dialogue emerged as necessary conditions for voice to flourish. Dialogue not only supported formative feedback but also nurtured a culture of collective reflection, echoing the work of Andrade and Valtcheva (2009), who identified reflective conversation as central to effective self-assessment. The findings underscore the relational ethics involved in student voice—one in which students and teachers share responsibility, learn from each other, and negotiate meaning collaboratively.

Perhaps most striking was the reported impact of student voice on engagement, understanding, and assessment literacy. Students articulated a deeper connection to tasks when they had a say in shaping them, consistent with previous research showing that participatory assessment fosters ownership and commitment (Willis et al., 2013; Klenowski, 2009). Teachers also noted higher levels of critical thinking, creativity, and reflection when students helped set criteria or design tasks, supporting Sadler's (1989) claim that effective formative assessment depends on learners' active engagement with standards.

The development of assessment literacy was another key outcome. Students' improved ability to interpret rubrics, understand feedback, and evaluate their work independently reflects the formative power of voice-inclusive practices. This supports Andrade's (2010) findings that student-involved assessment leads to better metacognitive awareness. More broadly, these results affirm the view that assessment is not simply a technical process but a cultural practice that shapes how students view learning, success, and themselves (Hill, 2013).

Interestingly, participants described a broader transformation in classroom culture, moving from anxiety-driven testing to collaborative dialogue. Students no longer saw assessment as something done "to" them, but rather "with" them. This reflects the concept of "assessment as learning" (Earl, 2003), wherein learners are active participants in the assessment process. Teachers, too, shifted their role from gatekeepers to facilitators, emphasizing dialogue over judgment. This cultural shift is aligned with Paris and Alim's (2017) vision of culturally sustaining pedagogy, in which diverse student experiences are recognized and affirmed in all aspects of instruction—including assessment.

While this study provides valuable insights into the dimensions of student voice in co-constructed assessment tasks, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was geographically limited to participants in Tehran, which may affect the generalizability of findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Norms around teacher authority, student participation, and assessment practices vary significantly across regions, and thus the themes identified here may manifest differently elsewhere. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which are subject to biases such as social desirability and recall distortion. Though rich in depth, interview data cannot fully capture the dynamic, lived experiences of assessment interactions as they unfold in real time. Lastly, the sample size, though sufficient for thematic saturation in qualitative research, may not represent the full range of diversity in student and teacher perspectives, particularly in under-resourced or highly stratified schools.

Future studies could extend this line of inquiry in several directions. Comparative research across different countries, school types, or educational levels would illuminate how sociocultural contexts shape the enactment of student voice in assessment. Additionally, longitudinal designs could explore how students' capacity to engage in co-constructed assessment evolves over time, and what long-term effects such practices have on learning outcomes, self-efficacy, and identity development. Mixed-methods research could also enhance understanding by triangulating interview data with classroom observations, document analysis, or performance data. Furthermore, exploring the perspectives of school leaders and policymakers would shed light on the systemic enablers and constraints of embedding student voice in assessment at a structural level.

For practitioners seeking to integrate student voice into assessment, several implications arise. First, professional development should include specific training on participatory assessment strategies, such as co-constructing rubrics, facilitating student-led conferences, or conducting collaborative reflection. Second, educators should create structured opportunities for all students—not just the confident or outspoken—to contribute to assessment design. This may involve using written input, anonymous suggestion tools, or small-group discussions to ensure inclusivity. Third, schools should promote a culture of trust, where students feel safe to critique, question, and propose alternatives to existing practices. Such a culture depends on authentic teacher listening, a willingness to share power, and sustained attention to relationship-building. Finally, assessment policies at the institutional level should provide the flexibility needed for teachers to experiment with student voice practices, recognizing that meaningful participation cannot be standardized but must be responsive to each classroom context.

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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 adheried 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.

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