Teachers' Narrative Accounts of Culturally Responsive Assessment Strategies in Urban Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explores teachers' narrative accounts of culturally responsive assessment strategies in urban schools, with a focus on understanding the specific practices, challenges, and reflective processes used by educators in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 29 teachers from diverse urban schools in Tehran. Participants were purposefully selected to represent various subject areas, grade levels, and cultural backgrounds. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved, and each session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo software, to identify recurring themes, subthemes, and concepts reflecting teachers' approaches to culturally responsive assessment. Teachers reported a wide range of culturally responsive assessment strategies, including integrating students' cultural backgrounds into assessment design, contextualizing tasks, and valuing linguistic diversity. Inclusive practices such as building trust, reducing bias, and engaging families were commonly cited, along with adaptations for marginalized identities and socioeconomic diversity. Teachers emphasized continuous professional learning, self-assessment, and collaboration despite facing systemic barriers such as standardized testing pressures and limited resources. Narrative accounts illustrated both the promise and challenge of advancing educational equity through assessment in culturally diverse urban settings. The study highlights the complex, multifaceted nature of culturally responsive assessment in urban schools, emphasizing teachers' commitment to equity, creativity, and ongoing reflection. Effective culturally responsive assessment requires not only individual teacher initiative but also supportive professional communities, flexible policy frameworks, and engagement with families and communities. Systemic changes and targeted professional development are needed to overcome existing barriers and promote sustainable, equitable assessment practices for all students.

Keywords: Culturally responsive assessment; urban education; qualitative research; narrative inquiry; educational equity; teacher reflection; Tehran schools.

Introduction

As urban classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators face mounting pressure to ensure that assessment practices are not only equitable but also culturally responsive. The global movement toward inclusive education, coupled with the rising migration to urban centers, has created learning environments where students bring a wide array of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds to school (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Traditional assessment methods, rooted in dominant cultural norms, often fail to capture the competencies, knowledge, and skills of culturally and linguistically diverse students,

thereby exacerbating educational inequities (Abell & Siegel, 2011; Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001). In response, scholars and practitioners advocate for the adoption of culturally responsive assessment strategies that recognize and honor students' cultural identities, languages, and lived experiences (Looney, 2011; Shepard, Penuel, & Pellegrino, 2018).

Culturally responsive assessment (CRA) is conceptualized as a dynamic process that aligns assessment content, methods, and interpretations with the cultural backgrounds and learning contexts of students (Abell & Siegel, 2011; McMillan, 2014). Rather than treating students' cultural differences as barriers, CRA positions cultural diversity as an asset that enriches the assessment process and enhances learning outcomes (Gay, 2018). In practice, CRA involves adapting assessment tasks, rubrics, and feedback to be relevant and accessible to all students, taking into account their language proficiencies, values, prior knowledge, and community experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001). Such adaptations may include the use of multilingual resources, culturally relevant scenarios, flexible demonstration formats, and collaborative or community-based assessment models (Looney, 2011; Hill, 2013).

The need for culturally responsive assessment is particularly acute in urban schools, where the intersection of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity is often most pronounced (Banks, 2015; Young, 2010). Research indicates that conventional assessment practices—such as standardized tests and one-size-fits-all rubrics—tend to privilege dominant cultural norms and inadvertently marginalize students from non-dominant backgrounds (Abell & Siegel, 2011; Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001). These practices may contribute to misidentification of student ability, negative self-perceptions, and long-term achievement gaps (Banks & Banks, 2019; Shepard et al., 2018). Conversely, the implementation of culturally responsive assessment has been shown to foster a sense of belonging, increase engagement, and support the academic success of diverse learners (Gay, 2018; Hill, 2013).

Despite the growing consensus regarding the importance of CRA, research suggests that teachers often struggle to enact culturally responsive assessment in practice (Looney, 2011; Siegel & Wissehr, 2011). Barriers include a lack of professional development, systemic policy constraints, limited access to culturally relevant materials, and the pervasive influence of standardized testing (McMillan, 2014; Young, 2010). Many educators report uncertainty about how to adapt assessments in ways that are both culturally responsive and consistent with curriculum standards (Siegel & Wissehr, 2011). Furthermore, teachers' own cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and implicit biases may shape their perceptions of students and their approaches to assessment, sometimes resulting in unintentional inequities (Gay, 2018; Looney, 2011).

A key strand of the literature highlights the critical role of teacher reflection, collaboration, and ongoing professional learning in the successful implementation of CRA (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Abell & Siegel, 2011). Teachers who engage in regular self-reflection and dialogue with colleagues are more likely to identify and address biases in their assessment practices, experiment with new approaches, and advocate for systemic change (Siegel & Wissehr, 2011; Hill, 2013). Collaborative professional learning communities can support educators in co-constructing culturally relevant rubrics, sharing resources, and developing assessment tasks that resonate with students' lived realities (McMillan, 2014; Banks, 2015). These processes are further strengthened when school leaders and policymakers prioritize culturally responsive assessment as a core component of instructional quality and equity (Shepard et al., 2018).

In recent years, qualitative research has emerged as a powerful tool for capturing the complexity and contextual nuances of culturally responsive assessment in urban schools (Looney, 2011; Young, 2010). Narrative inquiry, in particular, allows researchers to foreground the voices and lived experiences of teachers as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of CRA (Gay, 2018; Hill, 2013). Through in-depth interviews and storytelling, teachers articulate the strategies they use to adapt assessments, the dilemmas they encounter, and the insights they gain from working with culturally diverse learners (Abell &

Siegel, 2011). Such narrative accounts not only enrich our understanding of CRA in practice but also offer valuable guidance for teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to advance educational equity.

The Iranian context, and specifically the urban educational landscape of Tehran, presents a compelling case for examining culturally responsive assessment. Tehran's schools are characterized by significant cultural, ethnic, and linguistic heterogeneity, reflecting broader national and regional migration trends (Mehran, 2017). Teachers in these settings are tasked with meeting the needs of students from a variety of backgrounds, including Persian, Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Afghan communities, among others. Previous research suggests that teachers in Iran, like their counterparts globally, often rely on traditional assessment practices and face systemic obstacles in adapting to cultural diversity (Jalali & Rezvani, 2019; Ahmadi & Bajelan, 2022). At the same time, there is growing recognition among Iranian educators and policymakers of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment for improving educational access, engagement, and achievement (ShayesteFar, 2019).

Despite this recognition, empirical studies exploring teachers' experiences with culturally responsive assessment in Tehran remain limited. Most existing research has focused on curriculum reform, language policy, or teacher beliefs, with relatively little attention to assessment practices (Mehran, 2017; Jalali & Rezvani, 2019). There is a clear need for in-depth qualitative research that foregrounds the perspectives of teachers themselves, examining how they interpret, negotiate, and enact CRA in their daily work. By centering teachers' narrative accounts, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature and contribute to the growing body of research on culturally responsive education in urban settings.

The present study aims to explore how teachers in Tehran's urban schools describe and implement culturally responsive assessment strategies. Drawing on narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, the research addresses the following questions: (1) What strategies do teachers employ to make assessment practices culturally relevant and inclusive? (2) What challenges and barriers do teachers encounter in enacting CRA? (3) How do teachers reflect on and adapt their assessment practices in response to the needs of culturally diverse students? In addressing these questions, the study provides nuanced insights into the lived realities of teachers, highlights effective practices and persistent challenges, and offers implications for policy, professional development, and future research.

In sum, as educational systems worldwide strive to achieve equity and excellence in increasingly diverse urban schools, understanding teachers' perspectives on culturally responsive assessment is more important than ever. Through the lens of teachers' narrative accounts, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of CRA, as well as the systemic changes needed to support its widespread implementation.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how teachers in urban schools implement culturally responsive assessment strategies. The research was grounded in a narrative inquiry approach, allowing for the collection of rich, contextualized accounts of personal teaching and assessment experiences. The participants were 29 teachers from diverse urban school settings across Tehran, each with direct classroom experience and familiarity with culturally diverse student populations. Maximum variation sampling was used to capture a wide range of perspectives across subject areas, grade levels, and years of experience. Inclusion criteria required that participants had at least three years of teaching experience in urban public schools and had actively engaged in student assessment practices.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible framework to explore teachers' narratives while allowing for probing and clarification. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting either within the schools or through secure online video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and accessibility. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focused on teachers' understanding, application, and challenges in implementing culturally responsive assessment methods. Sample questions included: "Can you describe a time when you modified your assessment approach to better fit the cultural background of a student or group of students?" and "What challenges have you faced when trying to assess students from diverse cultural backgrounds?" All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Theoretical saturation was reached after 29 interviews, at which point no new themes or significant insights were emerging from the data, indicating sufficient depth and breadth of information.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis process, facilitated by NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12). The transcribed data were initially reviewed multiple times to achieve familiarization, followed by open coding to identify significant units of meaning. These initial codes were then organized into categories and subthemes through constant comparison and iterative refinement. Emerging patterns were analyzed to construct overarching themes that captured the essence of culturally responsive assessment strategies as experienced and described by the teachers. Throughout the analysis, memoing and reflective notes were used to maintain analytic rigor and capture evolving interpretations. To enhance trustworthiness, member checks were conducted with five participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations. Peer debriefing sessions among the research team further ensured the reliability of the coding framework and thematic structure.

Findings and Results

1. Cultural Relevance in Assessment Design

Integrating Students' Cultural Backgrounds:

Teachers described a strong commitment to designing assessments that incorporate students' cultural backgrounds. For example, they developed questions that reference local traditions, stories, and home languages. As one teacher reflected, "When I use proverbs or examples from their own culture, students become more engaged and understand the material better." This approach included the deliberate use of community-based examples and integrating elements of students' folklore, which was perceived to validate students' identities and foster belonging.

Contextual Adaptation of Assessment Tasks:

Many participants adapted assessment tasks to be more meaningful by situating them within students' real-life contexts. Teachers mentioned using flexible rubrics and designing performance tasks that allowed for different cultural perspectives, while actively avoiding stereotypes. One participant explained, "Instead of asking everyone to write about the same Western holiday, I let them write about celebrations from their own communities." This enabled a broader, more inclusive demonstration of learning.

Valuing Linguistic Diversity:

A recurring strategy involved embracing linguistic diversity in assessment instructions and tasks. Teachers created bilingual prompts, allowed for code-switching, and used translanguaging in instructions. As one interviewee noted, "Some students express themselves better in their mother tongue, so I allow answers in both Persian and their first language." Multilingual glossaries and flexible language policies helped reduce barriers and increased access for all students.

Reflecting Students' Experiences:

Assessment was made more relevant by giving students the choice to bring their own experiences into their responses, such as personal storytelling, neighborhood-specific themes, or identity mapping activities. A teacher stated, "I invite students to connect what they've learned to something from their daily life—it makes the assessment much more meaningful for them."

Decentering Western Norms:

Some teachers purposefully questioned or rejected standardized Western assessment norms by creating decolonized rubrics and offering alternative ways of showing knowledge. "We try to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach," said one participant, "and allow students to present knowledge in a way that makes sense within their culture."

2. Inclusive Assessment Practices

Building Trust Through Assessment:

Teachers described the importance of student voice and relationship-building in assessment, including co-creating criteria and negotiating goals with students. One interviewee remarked, "When students help decide what counts as good work, they feel respected and are more motivated." Respectful, culturally aware feedback was also cited as central to trust.

Recognizing Varied Learning Pathways:

There was a widespread effort to recognize multiple pathways to learning, including process-focused evaluation and flexible pacing. Teachers encouraged multimodal assessment (oral, visual, etc.) and recognized growth over time. As one participant shared, "Some students show understanding best through drawings or stories rather than written tests."

Reducing Bias and Stereotyping:

Teachers were aware of the risk of unconscious bias and worked to reduce stereotyping by engaging in bias awareness training, peer moderation, and rubric calibration. "We review each other's assessments to check for cultural bias," said one teacher. Transparency in grading and peer review helped build equity.

Engaging Families and Communities:

Family and community involvement in assessment was seen as crucial. Teachers invited family input on criteria, aligned expectations with parents, and included community review when possible. One teacher shared, "When families are part of the process, students feel their backgrounds are valued in school."

Adapting for Marginalized Identities:

Efforts to be inclusive extended to gender-inclusive language, sensitivity to neurodiversity, trauma-informed approaches, and the use of adaptive technologies. "I try to make sure assessment tasks don't trigger trauma or exclude anyone because of their identity," a participant reflected.

Supporting Socioeconomic Diversity:

Teachers adjusted their assessment strategies to accommodate students with fewer resources, such as using free or low-tech materials, real-life relevant tasks, and added scaffolding for students needing extra support. "Some of my students don't have internet at home, so I design assessments they can do with things they already have," explained one teacher.

3. Reflective Professional Practice

Continuous Teacher Learning:

Participants described ongoing professional learning, including participation in cultural humility training, anti-bias workshops, and reflective peer learning circles. As one teacher explained, "We share our experiences in weekly meetings to learn from each other's successes and mistakes."

Self-Assessment and Critical Reflection:

Teachers engaged in self-reflection through teaching diaries, bias checklists, and assessment logs. "After each unit, I look back and ask myself, 'Did I let my own biases influence the assessment?'" said a participant, demonstrating a commitment to self-awareness and professional growth.

Navigating Systemic Constraints:

Teachers identified external constraints such as curriculum mandates, standardized testing pressures, resource shortages, and policy rigidity as significant barriers to fully implementing culturally responsive assessment. "We're expected to prepare students for national exams, which often aren't culturally sensitive," one teacher lamented.

Collaborating for Responsive Design:

Collaboration among colleagues was viewed as key to developing and refining culturally responsive assessment strategies. Teachers described interdisciplinary planning, co-teaching, and the sharing of rubrics across departments. "We work together to make sure our assessments are fair to all students," shared one participant.

Emotional Labor and Advocacy:

Finally, teachers reported the emotional labor of advocating for culturally responsive assessment, noting experiences of compassion fatigue, micro-resistance within the system, and ethical dilemmas in grading. "It can be exhausting to keep pushing for change," said one teacher, "but I know it's worth it for my students."

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted strategies that teachers in Tehran's urban schools employ to foster culturally responsive assessment, revealing both their creative adaptations and the persistent barriers they encounter. Through rich narrative accounts, teachers detailed their efforts to design assessments that are culturally relevant, inclusive, and reflective of students' diverse lived experiences. These practices encompassed integrating students' cultural backgrounds into assessment design, valuing linguistic diversity, contextualizing assessment tasks, and decentering Western norms. In addition, teachers described inclusive assessment practices that build trust, recognize multiple learning pathways, reduce bias, engage families, and support marginalized identities. The study also revealed a deep commitment to reflective professional practice, as teachers continuously engaged in self-assessment, professional learning, collaboration, and advocacy despite facing systemic constraints.

One of the most salient themes in this research was the intentional integration of students' cultural backgrounds in assessment design. Teachers described how assessments referencing local stories, traditions, and home languages increased student engagement and fostered a sense of belonging. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant content in assessment to enhance student motivation and learning outcomes (Gay, 2018; Hill, 2013). The use of community-based examples and folklore mirrors Solano-Flores and Nelson-Barber's (2001) findings that assessments grounded in students' cultural experiences are perceived as more authentic and meaningful. Such strategies counteract the alienation and disengagement that can occur when assessments are anchored solely in dominant cultural norms (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Closely connected to cultural relevance was the value placed on linguistic diversity. Teachers in this study often utilized multilingual glossaries, bilingual prompts, and flexible language policies, allowing students to express understanding in both

Persian and their mother tongues. This practice reflects the recommendations of Abell and Siegel (2011), who advocate for assessment accommodations that recognize and support linguistic diversity. The ability to respond in one's preferred language not only reduces barriers to demonstrating knowledge but also signals respect for students' identities (Gay, 2018; Shepard et al., 2018). Translanguaging practices, as reported by participants, are supported by literature as powerful tools for equity in multilingual urban schools (Hill, 2013).

Teachers further described efforts to contextualize assessment tasks within students' real-life experiences, giving students the option to connect assessment content to their own communities and personal narratives. This approach supports Ladson-Billings' (2014) argument that assessments must move beyond surface-level cultural adaptations to truly reflect students' lived realities. By providing choices in assessment topics and embracing personal storytelling, teachers fostered agency and engagement, in line with best practices in culturally responsive pedagogy (Looney, 2011).

A notable theme was the move to decenter Western assessment norms. Teachers developed decolonized rubrics, offered alternative demonstration formats, and deliberately questioned the imposition of standardized, one-size-fits-all methods. This is consistent with the work of Gay (2018) and Siegel and Wissehr (2011), who argue that culturally responsive assessment requires challenging the dominance of Western-centric frameworks and legitimizing alternative forms of knowing and demonstrating learning.

Inclusive assessment practices emerged as another vital dimension. Teachers described efforts to build trust by co-creating assessment criteria, engaging in respectful feedback, and involving students in goal-setting. These findings resonate with Shepard et al. (2018), who emphasize the role of student voice and relational trust in effective assessment. The recognition of varied learning pathways—through process-focused evaluation, multimodal assessments, and flexible pacing—further underscores teachers' commitment to equity (Abell & Siegel, 2011; Banks, 2015).

Bias reduction and anti-stereotyping strategies were prominently featured in the interviews. Teachers engaged in bias-awareness training, peer moderation, and rubric calibration to minimize subjective judgments and promote fairness. This is well supported by prior research, which highlights the risks of unconscious bias in assessment and the value of structured reflection and collaboration in mitigating it (Looney, 2011; Siegel & Wissehr, 2011). Transparency in grading and peer review mechanisms, as described by teachers, align with recommendations for fostering greater equity and trustworthiness in assessment practices (McMillan, 2014).

Engaging families and communities in assessment design and evaluation was also seen as crucial. Teachers reported involving parents in the development of assessment criteria and seeking community input, echoing Banks' (2015) assertion that culturally responsive assessment must extend beyond the classroom to include family and community perspectives. Such engagement not only affirms students' cultural identities but also builds stronger school-community partnerships (Banks & Banks, 2019).

The adaptation of assessments for marginalized identities—such as gender-inclusivity, neurodiversity, and trauma-sensitivity—demonstrates a nuanced understanding of intersectionality in assessment. Teachers' efforts to employ adaptive technologies and trauma-informed approaches reflect growing international emphasis on inclusive education and the need for assessments that accommodate diverse needs (Hill, 2013; Young, 2010). Similarly, the use of low-tech or free-resource assessments to address socioeconomic diversity aligns with Looney's (2011) call for assessments that are accessible to all students, regardless of background.

Reflective professional practice underpinned much of the teachers' work. Participants described ongoing professional learning through cultural humility training, reflective journaling, and anti-bias workshops. These activities are critical to the development of assessment literacy and the capacity for self-critique (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Abell & Siegel, 2011). Teachers'

engagement in collaborative planning, co-teaching, and shared rubric development is also supported by literature on professional learning communities as engines of change (McMillan, 2014).

However, the findings also point to significant systemic constraints. Teachers described pressures from standardized testing, rigid curriculum mandates, and resource limitations as barriers to fully enacting culturally responsive assessment. These systemic factors echo concerns raised by Shepard et al. (2018) and Jalali and Rezvani (2019), who note that the dominance of high-stakes testing and centralized curricula often restricts teachers' autonomy and creativity. Emotional labor and advocacy fatigue were reported by teachers as well, highlighting the personal and professional costs of persistently pushing for more equitable practices (Gay, 2018).

In sum, this study adds to a growing body of research illustrating that while teachers are committed to culturally responsive assessment, they must navigate a complex landscape of policy, practice, and personal reflection. The strategies identified here—ranging from integrating cultural content to engaging families and pursuing ongoing reflection—demonstrate both the promise and the challenge of advancing educational equity in urban schools.

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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