The Concept of Assessment as Learning: Educator Perspectives From a Phenomenological Lens

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore educators' perspectives on the concept of assessment as learning through a phenomenological lens to understand how it is conceptualized, enacted, and experienced within classroom contexts. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 educators from various schools in Tehran. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure diverse teaching backgrounds. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Pedagogical foundations of assessment as learning, including emphasis on self-regulation, formative feedback, learner autonomy, integrated assessment, shifts in educator roles, and purposeful assessment design; (2) Challenges and constraints such as institutional barriers, professional development needs, student readiness, resource limitations, assessment culture, and equity concerns; and (3) Perceived outcomes and impacts including deepened learning, increased student engagement, enhanced motivation, improved metacognition, and strengthened classroom relationships. Educators recognized the potential of assessment as learning to foster learner agency and deeper engagement but identified significant systemic and cultural obstacles that limit its full implementation. The study highlights educators' sophisticated understanding of assessment as learning and its benefits for student autonomy and metacognitive development. However, institutional, cultural, and resource-related constraints pose challenges that require systemic support. Professional development, collaborative communities, and aligned policies are critical to enable meaningful adoption of assessment as learning. These findings provide valuable insights for educational stakeholders aiming to promote learner-centered assessment practices.

Keywords: Assessment as learning, self-regulation, formative feedback, learner autonomy, phenomenology, educator perspectives, qualitative research, Tehran.

Introduction

The landscape of educational assessment has evolved dramatically in recent decades, moving beyond the traditional dichotomy of summative and formative practices toward more nuanced and learner-centered approaches (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Amid these developments, the concept of "assessment as learning" has emerged as a powerful paradigm, emphasizing the active role of students in the assessment process and promoting deeper learning, autonomy, and self-regulation (Earl, 2013). Distinct from both assessment of learning, which focuses on measurement and accountability, and assessment for learning, which aims to inform teaching and learning, assessment as learning positions students as central agents who engage in

continuous reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting (Dann, 2014; Panadero et al., 2018). This orientation aligns with contemporary theories of constructivist pedagogy and metacognitive development, suggesting that when learners are actively involved in monitoring and regulating their progress, they become more independent, motivated, and effective lifelong learners (Zimmerman, 2002; Andrade & Brookhart, 2019).

Despite its theoretical appeal, assessment as learning remains less widely implemented than other assessment approaches, often overshadowed by the imperatives of standardized testing and performance accountability in many educational contexts (Klenowski, 2009; Stobart, 2008). This is especially evident in systems where high-stakes exams and summative assessment practices dominate curricular and instructional decisions, sometimes to the detriment of students' deeper engagement and critical thinking skills (Torrance, 2012). In these contexts, educators may experience significant tension between their aspirations for student-centered assessment and institutional demands for measurable outcomes (Looney et al., 2018). Moreover, the operationalization of assessment as learning can be challenging, requiring significant shifts in teacher beliefs, classroom culture, and pedagogical practice (Lee, 2011). As such, understanding educators' perspectives and lived experiences is essential for illuminating both the potential and the practical challenges of this approach.

The theoretical underpinnings of assessment as learning draw from a rich tradition of research on formative assessment, self-regulated learning, and metacognition. Black and Wiliam (1998) first articulated the power of formative assessment to enhance student achievement, emphasizing the importance of feedback and student involvement in the learning process. Building on these foundations, scholars have advocated for assessment approaches that move beyond mere provision of feedback to foster learners' self-awareness, goal orientation, and self-regulation (Sadler, 1989; Panadero et al., 2016). Assessment as learning encapsulates these ideas by encouraging students to actively participate in the assessment process— critiquing their own work, articulating learning intentions, and engaging in ongoing reflection (Earl, 2013). This metacognitive dimension is crucial: research consistently shows that students who develop strong self-assessment skills are more likely to take ownership of their learning, persist in the face of difficulties, and achieve higher levels of academic success (Andrade & Du, 2007; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

One of the central features of assessment as learning is its emphasis on learner agency. By giving students greater voice and choice in how they demonstrate learning, teachers can foster a sense of empowerment and intrinsic motivation (Harris & Brown, 2013). Rather than being passive recipients of grades and feedback, students are invited to co-construct criteria, set learning goals, and monitor their own progress. This active engagement can transform classroom dynamics, promoting mutual respect, open communication, and a collaborative learning culture (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Cowie, 2005). Furthermore, the integration of assessment as learning within everyday instruction can enhance the authenticity and relevance of assessment tasks, making learning experiences more meaningful for students (Kearney, 2013). Such practices are particularly significant in diverse and inclusive classrooms, where differentiated assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy are critical for equity and student success (Heritage, 2010; Shepard, 2019).

Despite the clear pedagogical benefits, multiple studies have documented the barriers and challenges teachers encounter in enacting assessment as learning. These include institutional constraints such as rigid curriculum requirements, high-stakes accountability systems, limited resources, and insufficient professional development opportunities (DeLuca et al., 2016; Yan & Brown, 2017). Teachers may also confront resistance from students who are unfamiliar with self-directed assessment or lack the requisite skills and dispositions for effective self-regulation (Birenbaum et al., 2011). Parental expectations and broader assessment cultures, which often prioritize grades and summative outcomes over formative processes, further complicate the adoption of assessment as learning (Brown & Harris, 2014). These challenges are compounded by the need for substantial

shifts in teacher identity—from being the sole authority in assessment to becoming facilitators who guide students toward autonomy (Swaffield, 2011; Klenowski, 2009).

The international literature on assessment as learning provides valuable insights, but it is important to consider how contextual factors shape its meaning and implementation. In many countries, including Iran, the educational system is heavily influenced by centralized curricula, standardized examinations, and traditional conceptions of teacher authority (Zarei & Sharif, 2015; Zia Hosseini, 2019). These factors can hinder the widespread adoption of innovative assessment approaches, even when teachers recognize their pedagogical value. Qualitative research that foregrounds educators' voices is therefore essential for understanding how assessment as learning is interpreted, negotiated, and practiced within specific cultural and institutional settings (Lam, 2016; Yan & Brown, 2017). Phenomenological inquiry, in particular, offers a means of capturing the complexity and richness of teachers' lived experiences, revealing not only common challenges but also the strategies and insights that support transformative practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Recent studies have begun to explore teachers' perceptions of assessment as learning, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development, collaborative inquiry, and supportive leadership to sustain meaningful change (Lee & Coniam, 2013; Cowie, 2005). Professional learning communities, mentorship programs, and reflective practice have been identified as key mechanisms for building teachers' confidence and competence in assessment as learning (Hargreaves, 2013; Harris & Brown, 2013). In addition, the effective use of technology—such as digital portfolios and feedback platforms—can enhance opportunities for student self-assessment and formative feedback, making assessment as learning more feasible in large or resource-constrained classrooms (JISC, 2015; Panadero et al., 2016). Nonetheless, for such initiatives to succeed, systemic changes are required that go beyond individual teacher efforts to encompass school culture, leadership practices, and policy frameworks (Stobart, 2008; Shepard, 2019).

Given these complexities, there is a pressing need for in-depth research that examines the phenomenon of assessment as learning from the perspective of educators working within diverse educational contexts. Understanding how teachers conceptualize, experience, and enact assessment as learning can inform the design of professional development programs, guide policy reform, and ultimately support more meaningful and equitable assessment practices (DeLuca et al., 2016; Heritage, 2010). Moreover, exploring the lived experiences of educators can illuminate the micro-level dynamics that facilitate or hinder change, offering practical insights for teachers, leaders, and policymakers committed to fostering learner autonomy and self-regulation.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the concept of assessment as learning through the eyes of educators in Tehran, employing a phenomenological approach to capture the complexity and depth of their perspectives. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of teachers, the research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do educators define and conceptualize assessment as learning in their professional practice? (2) What are the perceived benefits, challenges, and outcomes associated with implementing assessment as learning? (3) How do institutional, cultural, and personal factors shape the enactment of assessment as learning in the classroom? By foregrounding educators' voices, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of assessment as learning, offering both theoretical and practical implications for educational practice and policy.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing a phenomenological approach to explore educators' perspectives on the concept of assessment as learning. The phenomenological lens was selected to gain deep insights into the lived experiences and interpretations of educators regarding the role and implementation of assessment as learning in their teaching practices. The participants consisted of 27 educators from various educational institutions in Tehran. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with assessment as learning, ensuring diversity in teaching backgrounds, subject areas, and years of professional experience. The sample size was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation, at which point no new significant themes emerged from the interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while providing enough flexibility for emergent topics relevant to the research objectives. Each interview was conducted face-to-face in a quiet setting convenient for the participants, and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit educators' definitions, experiences, perceived challenges, and perceived benefits of assessment as learning, as well as their views on its impact on student learning and autonomy. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic approach, consistent with phenomenological research traditions. Transcripts were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic coding and organization of the data. The analysis proceeded in several stages: initial open coding, identification of emerging patterns, and the clustering of codes into overarching themes reflecting the essence of educators' experiences. Throughout the analytic process, constant comparison was employed to refine categories and ensure interpretive rigor. The research team regularly engaged in reflexive discussions to ensure credibility and to address potential biases. Data collection and analysis continued iteratively until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new relevant themes were identified in the data.

Findings and Results

1. Pedagogical Foundations of Assessment as Learning

Emphasis on Self-Regulation:

Educators consistently highlighted the centrality of self-regulation within assessment as learning. Teachers described how students are encouraged to set learning goals, monitor their progress, engage in self-evaluation, and reflect on their strengths and areas for growth, which fosters a genuine ownership of learning. As one participant noted, "When my students track their own progress, they become much more invested in the process and feel responsible for their improvement."

Formative Feedback Practices:

Formative feedback emerged as a cornerstone, with teachers emphasizing the importance of providing descriptive, timely, and dialogic feedback. Many recounted using scaffolding techniques and offering growth-oriented comments that guide students to recognize their own next steps. One educator explained, "I always try to give feedback that helps them see what they did well and what they could try differently next time—it's about having a conversation, not just giving a grade."

Learner Agency and Autonomy:

Many participants spoke of the importance of giving students choices in assessment, allowing them to undertake independent tasks and participate actively in negotiating assessment criteria. This approach was seen as empowering students to take charge of their learning. As one interviewee shared, "Letting students have a say in how they show what they've learned makes them more confident and engaged."

Integrating Assessment into Instruction:

Teachers described integrating assessment seamlessly within instructional activities. By embedding assessment tasks into daily lessons and using them for real-time instructional adjustments, educators felt assessment as learning became authentic and curriculum-aligned. One participant remarked, "Assessment is not something separate—it's woven into everything we do in the classroom."

Shifts in Educator Role:

Participants described a clear shift from traditional instructor to facilitator. They identified themselves as guides who foster independent learning, encouraging students to take initiative and become active participants. As one teacher explained, "I see myself less as someone who delivers information and more as a facilitator who helps students discover things for themselves."

Purposeful Assessment Design:

Educators emphasized the necessity for clear objectives, transparency, and flexibility in assessment tasks. Designing assessments that align with learning outcomes and are adaptable to students' needs was seen as essential. One interviewee observed, "Students do better when they know exactly what's expected and have some flexibility in how they demonstrate their understanding."

2. Challenges and Constraints

Institutional Barriers:

Teachers pointed to institutional obstacles such as rigid school policies, pressure from standardized testing, lack of administrative support, and time constraints. These factors often made it difficult to fully implement assessment as learning. One educator commented, "There's always a push for test results, so sometimes there isn't enough time for real assessment as learning."

Professional Development Needs:

Many educators acknowledged insufficient professional development and lingering conceptual ambiguities regarding assessment as learning. They expressed a desire for concrete examples and more opportunities for collaborative learning. As one participant explained, "I want more training on what this really looks like in practice, and time to learn from colleagues who are already doing it."

Student Readiness and Resistance:

Some teachers encountered challenges related to student unfamiliarity, lack of motivation, fixed mindsets, or even anxiety about more autonomous assessment methods. For example, one participant noted, "At first, students are confused or even anxious because they are used to being told what to do and what counts."

Resource Limitations:

Educators pointed to inadequate materials, limited technology, and large class sizes as significant hurdles to effective assessment as learning. "When you have 35 students and just one computer, it's hard to personalize assessment and feedback for everyone," said one teacher.

Assessment Culture:

A prevailing culture of summative assessment, parental expectations, the high value placed on grades, and a competitive environment were cited as barriers. As one educator put it, "Parents want to see grades, not process. The culture is very results-oriented and doesn't always appreciate different ways of assessing."

Equity and Inclusivity:

Participants discussed the challenge of differentiating assessment for diverse learners, mitigating language barriers, ensuring fairness, and applying culturally responsive practices. "Some students need extra support, and it's not always easy to make sure everyone has the same chance to succeed," a teacher remarked.

3. Perceived Outcomes and Impacts

Deepened Learning:

Educators reported that assessment as learning promoted deeper conceptual understanding, critical thinking, long-term retention, and knowledge transfer. "Students really understand the 'why' behind what they learn, not just the 'what'," explained one teacher.

Student Engagement:

Increased student participation, sense of relevance, and enjoyment were commonly reported. Teachers observed more active involvement during lessons. "When students see the connection to their own lives, they're much more eager to participate," shared a participant.

Enhanced Motivation:

Many participants described seeing a shift toward intrinsic motivation and a mastery-oriented approach. Students reportedly felt pride in their progress and strove for improvement. "It's amazing to watch students become motivated by their own growth instead of just chasing grades," said one educator.

Improved Metacognition:

Assessment as learning was credited with fostering students' awareness of their own thinking, self-questioning, strategic planning, and evaluative judgment. As one teacher commented, "They learn how to learn—they're not just memorizing, but thinking about how they're learning."

Classroom Relationships:

Finally, educators described improved teacher-student trust, stronger peer support, open communication, and increased mutual respect. "There's more respect both ways when students see we care about their learning, not just their scores," explained a participant.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored educators' perspectives on the concept of assessment as learning through a phenomenological approach, highlighting three main themes: pedagogical foundations, challenges and constraints, and perceived outcomes and impacts. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of how teachers conceptualize and enact assessment as learning, the obstacles they face, and the benefits they observe for student learning and engagement.

The first theme, pedagogical foundations, underscored educators' recognition of self-regulation and learner agency as central to assessment as learning. Participants emphasized the importance of students setting goals, monitoring progress, reflecting on their learning, and taking ownership of the process. This aligns with extensive research demonstrating that self-regulated learning is a critical component of effective assessment as learning (Zimmerman, 2002; Panadero et al., 2018). Teachers' emphasis on formative feedback practices, including descriptive, timely, and dialogic feedback, echoes Black and Wiliam's (1998) seminal work highlighting feedback's pivotal role in fostering student learning. Furthermore, the shift in educator

roles—from authoritative transmitters of knowledge to facilitators who scaffold autonomy—reflects current conceptualizations of learner-centered pedagogy and the evolving professional identity required to implement assessment as learning successfully (Swaffield, 2011; Boud & Molloy, 2013).

The integration of assessment into daily instruction, as reported by participants, illustrates a move towards authentic and seamless assessment practices, consistent with findings by Kearney (2013) and Earl (2013). Purposeful assessment design, with clear objectives and flexibility, further supports the notion that transparency and alignment are necessary to empower students and enhance engagement (Andrade & Brookhart, 2019). These pedagogical foundations reveal educators' sophisticated understanding of assessment as learning, which is encouraging given the conceptual complexity of this approach (Dann, 2014).

The second theme concerned challenges and constraints in enacting assessment as learning. Institutional barriers such as standardized testing pressures, rigid policies, and time constraints were frequently mentioned and mirror findings from DeLuca et al. (2016) and Yan and Brown (2017). These systemic factors often restrict teachers' ability to innovate assessment practices, limiting opportunities for meaningful student involvement. Similarly, participants' reported needs for more professional development and collaborative support echo prior research underscoring the importance of ongoing training and community to build assessment literacy and confidence (Lee & Coniam, 2013; Harris & Brown, 2013).

Student readiness and resistance were also notable barriers, with some students unfamiliar or anxious about autonomous assessment. This finding is consistent with Birenbaum et al. (2011), who identified motivational and cognitive factors influencing students' engagement in self-assessment. Resource limitations, including large class sizes and limited access to technology, further constrained implementation, particularly in contexts with limited educational infrastructure (JISC, 2015; Panadero et al., 2016). The entrenched culture of summative assessment and parental expectations emerged as a pervasive obstacle, aligning with Brown and Harris's (2014) observations about the dominant role of grades and performance in many school systems.

Equity and inclusivity concerns highlighted by participants reflect a growing awareness of the need for culturally responsive and differentiated assessment practices (Heritage, 2010; Shepard, 2019). Teachers' efforts to accommodate diverse learners amid structural constraints point to the tension between ideals of assessment as learning and realities of classroom diversity, a challenge frequently documented in the literature (Klenowski, 2009).

The third theme, perceived outcomes and impacts, provides evidence that when implemented effectively, assessment as learning can foster deeper learning, enhanced student engagement, intrinsic motivation, metacognition, and improved classroom relationships. These outcomes corroborate previous empirical studies linking self-assessment and learner involvement with critical thinking development, sustained engagement, and motivational benefits (Andrade & Du, 2007; Cowie, 2005; Panadero et al., 2018). Participants' descriptions of improved metacognitive awareness—students' ability to monitor and regulate their own learning—are particularly important, given the strong associations between metacognition and academic success documented by Zimmerman and Schunk (2011).

Moreover, the social dimension of assessment as learning, including enhanced teacher-student trust and peer support, echoes Boud and Molloy's (2013) argument that assessment practices shape relational and affective aspects of learning environments. The finding that students develop pride in their progress and a mastery orientation aligns with self-determination theory, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy and competence in motivating learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Together, these findings highlight the transformative potential of assessment as learning but also its vulnerability to contextual constraints. The educators' narratives reveal a dynamic interplay between pedagogical ideals, systemic realities, and learner factors that shape the implementation and impact of assessment as learning.

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