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## Indicators of Equity and Access in Formative Assessment Practices: Student Perspectives

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify indicators of equity and access in formative assessment practices from the perspectives of students in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 25 students from various educational institutions in Tehran. Participants were purposefully sampled to ensure diversity in backgrounds and academic experiences. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, with open coding and the development of themes and subthemes reflecting students' experiences and perceptions related to equity and access in formative assessment. Analysis of the interview data revealed three main themes: fairness and transparency, accessibility and support, and inclusivity and student voice. Students emphasized the importance of clear assessment criteria, unbiased feedback, and consistent grading as foundational to fair assessment. Accessibility was highlighted through the need for language support, digital equity, and individualized accommodations, while emotional and academic supports were also noted as crucial. Inclusivity emerged in students' calls for culturally sensitive practices, active mechanisms for student feedback, adaptation to learning styles, and opportunities for peer collaboration. Participants provided specific examples of how these indicators influenced their sense of fairness and engagement in formative assessment tasks. The study underscores the centrality of student perspectives in identifying practical indicators of equity and access within formative assessment. Findings highlight the necessity of transparent criteria, accessible resources, and inclusive practices to ensure that all students can meaningfully participate and benefit from formative assessment. The results provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers committed to fostering more equitable and supportive assessment environments in diverse educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Equity; Access; Formative Assessment; Student Perspectives; Inclusivity; Fairness; Accessibility; Qualitative Research; Education; Tehran.

## Introduction

Ensuring equity and access in educational assessment is a fundamental goal of contemporary education systems, especially in diverse, multicultural societies (Stobart, 2018). Over the past two decades, the concept of assessment has expanded beyond summative judgments of learning to include formative assessment practices that inform instruction and promote student growth (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Formative assessment, when implemented equitably, can be a transformative force in classrooms, providing all students with meaningful opportunities to demonstrate and develop their learning (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). However, without careful attention to issues of equity and access, formative assessment practices can inadvertently perpetuate or even exacerbate existing educational disparities (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, & Colbert, 2014). Understanding the indicators

of equity and access from the perspective of students—the primary stakeholders—remains an under-explored yet essential domain in educational research.

Formative assessment is typically defined as the process by which teachers and learners use evidence of learning to adapt teaching and improve student outcomes (Wiliam, 2011). While there is a robust body of literature documenting the benefits of formative assessment, including increased student engagement, improved academic performance, and enhanced self-regulation (Panadero, 2017; Black & Wiliam, 2009), these benefits are not always distributed equally. Variations in the design and implementation of formative assessment can lead to discrepancies in who benefits and how (Harris & Brown, 2013). For instance, students from marginalized backgrounds may encounter linguistic, cultural, or technological barriers that undermine their ability to fully engage with formative assessment tasks (Looney, 2011). Moreover, the extent to which formative assessment practices are transparent, inclusive, and supportive often depends on teachers' beliefs, school policies, and available resources (Charteris & Smardon, 2018).

The principle of equity in education is concerned with fairness and justice in the distribution of educational opportunities and resources (OECD, 2018). In the context of formative assessment, equity entails ensuring that every student—regardless of background, identity, or ability—has access to high-quality assessment opportunities that are responsive to their unique needs (Klenowski, 2009). Access, meanwhile, is about removing barriers that prevent students from participating fully in assessment processes and benefiting from feedback intended to support their learning (Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013). Both equity and access require that assessment practices are designed to be culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate, and sensitive to students' diverse life experiences (Absolum et al., 2009). These principles have become increasingly salient as education systems strive to close achievement gaps and promote inclusive excellence (OECD, 2018).

Despite the growing emphasis on equity and access, evidence suggests that gaps persist in both policy and practice. Several studies have documented instances where assessment tasks are misaligned with students' prior knowledge or cultural backgrounds, resulting in unfair disadvantages for certain groups (Brookhart, 2013; Shepard, Penuel, & Pellegrino, 2018). Other research points to the digital divide, whereby students with limited access to technology are less able to participate in online formative assessments or receive timely feedback (Huang et al., 2021). Language barriers remain a significant concern, particularly for multilingual learners who may struggle to interpret assessment instructions or feedback not tailored to their linguistic needs (Shohamy, 2011). As a result, achieving genuine equity and access in formative assessment requires systematic attention to the social, cultural, and technological factors shaping students' experiences.

Student voice—the active engagement of students in decision-making about their learning and assessment—has emerged as a powerful lever for advancing equity (Fielding, 2012). Research indicates that involving students in co-constructing assessment criteria, reflecting on their own learning, and providing feedback to teachers can enhance the relevance and fairness of assessment practices (Harris & Brown, 2018; Dann, 2014). When students perceive assessment as transparent, responsive, and inclusive, their sense of belonging and motivation increases, resulting in improved learning outcomes (Sambell et al., 2013; Panadero, 2017). Conversely, when students encounter opaque or rigid assessment systems that disregard their perspectives, feelings of alienation and disengagement may ensue (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Thus, understanding how students perceive the indicators of equity and access in formative assessment is not only academically significant but also critical for informing practice and policy.

Recent scholarship has identified several key domains where equity and access must be considered in formative assessment. First, fairness and transparency are foundational. This includes providing clear assessment criteria, offering unbiased and constructive feedback, and ensuring that all students understand how they are being evaluated (Brookhart, 2013; Shepard et al., 2018). Second, accessibility and support are necessary to address the diverse needs of learners, such as linguistic differences,

disabilities, or socioeconomic challenges (Absolum et al., 2009; Looney, 2011). Providing multiple modes of assessment, adapting tasks for individual needs, and ensuring access to learning resources are central strategies in this regard. Third, inclusivity and student voice highlight the importance of culturally relevant assessment practices, opportunities for student input, and the creation of safe and supportive classroom environments (Fielding, 2012; Charteris & Smardon, 2018).

Despite these theoretical advances, much of the research on equity in assessment is situated at the policy or practitioner level, with less emphasis on the lived experiences and perspectives of students themselves (Klenowski, 2009). This gap is significant, as students are uniquely positioned to identify subtle forms of exclusion or disadvantage that may escape the notice of adults. Their insights can illuminate how formal policies are enacted (or subverted) in practice and can inform the design of more effective and just assessment systems (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2014). Moreover, in rapidly changing educational landscapes—marked by technological innovation, increased diversity, and shifting pedagogical paradigms—it is critical to continually re-examine what equity and access mean from the standpoint of those most directly affected (Huang et al., 2021).

Tehran, as a large, culturally diverse metropolis, offers a unique context for examining these issues. Its student population encompasses a broad spectrum of linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, making it an ideal setting for exploring the complexities of equity and access in formative assessment. While educational reforms in Iran have increasingly recognized the importance of inclusive and student-centered assessment practices (Azizi et al., 2022), implementation challenges persist, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Given this background, the present study aims to identify and analyze the indicators of equity and access in formative assessment practices from the perspectives of students in Tehran. By focusing on students' voices, the research seeks to bridge existing gaps in the literature and provide actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to fostering more equitable educational environments. The findings are expected to inform not only local and national assessment reforms but also contribute to the broader international discourse on inclusive education and social justice.

In sum, advancing equity and access in formative assessment is a multidimensional challenge that requires ongoing dialogue among researchers, educators, and students. The increasing recognition of student perspectives as essential for effective assessment design signals a paradigm shift towards more democratic and just educational practices (Harris & Brown, 2018). As education systems worldwide grapple with persistent achievement gaps and strive for greater inclusivity, research that centers student experiences will be critical for realizing the full promise of formative assessment as a tool for equity and excellence.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design and Participants*

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore student perspectives on indicators of equity and access within formative assessment practices. The research focused on gathering in-depth insights into students' lived experiences and perceptions, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the complex and nuanced aspects of equity and access in educational assessment. The participants consisted of 25 students from various educational institutions in Tehran, selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in backgrounds, academic disciplines, and personal experiences. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's aims and procedures, and informed consent was obtained prior to their involvement.

## *Data Collection*

Data collection was conducted exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' views while ensuring consistency across key topics. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of the relevant literature and pilot-tested with a small group of students prior to the main study. Interviews covered topics such as perceptions of fairness, accessibility, and support within formative assessment contexts. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or significant insights emerged from additional interviews.

## *Data analysis*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was utilized to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. Analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to ensure familiarization with the data, followed by open coding to identify key concepts and patterns. Codes were then organized into broader themes and subthemes representing various indicators of equity and access in formative assessment practices. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison techniques were used to refine categories and ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking was employed with several participants to validate the emerging themes and interpretations. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and data protection, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

## **Findings and Results**

### 1. Fairness and Transparency

#### Clear Assessment Criteria:

Students emphasized the importance of clear and accessible assessment criteria in formative assessment. Many noted that having rubrics and explicit explanations helped them understand how their work would be evaluated and what was expected. One student mentioned, "When teachers give us the grading criteria before the task, it feels fair and I know exactly what to do." Students appreciated consistency in grading and valued when teachers ensured that everyone had the same understanding of the requirements.

#### Bias-Free Feedback:

Interviewees consistently highlighted the need for feedback to be objective and free from favoritism. Inclusive language and impartial comments were seen as crucial indicators of equity. As one participant expressed, "It's important that the feedback is about my work, not about who I am. I don't want to feel like someone is getting a better comment just because the teacher likes them." Consistency across students and an explicit effort to avoid bias were frequently mentioned.

#### Student Involvement in Criteria:

Several students appreciated opportunities to be involved in the creation or adaptation of assessment criteria. Co-construction of rubrics and the inclusion of student voice in feedback were cited as empowering. One participant noted, "I felt more motivated when I helped set the standards for our projects. It made me feel the assessment was actually about my learning." The negotiation of expectations contributed to a sense of ownership and transparency.

#### Equal Opportunity for Participation:

Many students indicated that flexible timing, access to assessment materials, and support for absentees helped ensure everyone had an equal chance to succeed. Accommodating individual needs, such as for students who missed sessions or

needed extra support, was considered essential. A student remarked, “If you miss a class, the teacher makes sure you still get the materials and a chance to catch up. That’s real fairness.”

#### Consistent Application of Standards:

Students valued standardized assessment procedures and regular teacher collaboration to ensure equity. The use of exemplars and clear grading benchmarks were also frequently mentioned as positive practices. One interviewee shared, “It makes a big difference when teachers use the same examples and talk together about how to grade. I trust the system more.”

#### Timely Communication of Expectations:

Early and clear communication regarding assessment requirements was seen as a major factor in promoting fairness. Students appreciated when teachers provided detailed instructions and were open to questions. As one student described, “When we get all the details ahead of time and can ask questions, it reduces our stress and confusion.”

#### Confidentiality in Grading:

Maintaining the privacy of grades and feedback was another important theme. Students noted that anonymous feedback and secure record-keeping contributed to their sense of fairness. “I like when my grades aren’t announced in front of everyone. It feels more respectful and private,” said one participant.

### 2. Accessibility and Support

#### Language Accessibility:

Students expressed that using plain language, offering bilingual resources, and providing visual aids significantly enhanced their understanding of assessment tasks. Clarification sessions were also valued. A participant explained, “Sometimes the words are too academic, but when teachers explain things simply or use visuals, everyone can follow.”

#### Physical Accessibility:

Adaptations to the physical format of assessments, accessible venues, and the use of supportive technology were highlighted, particularly for students with disabilities. One student commented, “Having my test in a format I can read, or in a room that’s easy for me to access, makes me feel included.”

#### Digital Access and Equity:

Students discussed the challenges of digital assessments, including device and internet access, and the importance of online training and technical support. “Not everyone has the same technology at home, so when the school helps with devices or support, it really makes a difference,” one interviewee remarked.

#### Emotional Support:

Encouragement, empathetic teachers, peer support, and resources for managing stress were repeatedly mentioned as important supports. “If I’m anxious about an assessment, my teacher always checks in or pairs me with someone supportive,” shared a participant.

#### Individualized Accommodations:

Extra time, alternate formats, personalized feedback, flexible deadlines, and assistive tools were all cited as essential for supporting diverse student needs. As one student described, “Being allowed to take more time because of my learning difference helped me show what I really know.”

#### Academic Resources:

Access to study guides, exemplars, revision sessions, and tutors was seen as vital for equitable formative assessment. “Having examples and revision classes helped me understand what a good answer looks like,” said one participant.

### 3. Inclusivity and Student Voice

#### Cultural Sensitivity:

Recognition of diversity, use of culturally relevant content, and avoidance of stereotypes were viewed as core indicators of inclusivity. “I feel more motivated when the topics reflect my background and are not just focused on one culture,” shared a student.

#### Student Feedback Mechanisms:

Regular surveys, open discussions, and suggestion boxes for feedback, as well as follow-up on student input, were appreciated by participants. “When teachers ask for our feedback and actually change things, I feel respected,” explained one student.

#### Adaptation to Learning Styles:

Students highlighted the value of being able to choose their preferred assessment mode—visual, oral, or written—and appreciated flexibility. “Some people do better with presentations, some with writing—giving us options shows the teacher cares about how we learn best,” said a participant.

#### Peer Collaboration Opportunities:

Group assessments, peer review, collaborative projects, and shared learning spaces were all cited as beneficial for inclusion and equity. As one interviewee put it, “Working with others helps me learn and makes the process feel less stressful.”

#### Non-Discriminatory Practices:

Participants emphasized respect for differences, zero tolerance for bias, and the importance of fostering inclusive participation. “I’ve never felt judged for who I am in this class. Everyone’s ideas matter, and that’s really important,” one student stated.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the indicators of equity and access in formative assessment practices from the perspective of students in Tehran. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 students, three primary themes emerged: fairness and transparency, accessibility and support, and inclusivity and student voice. These themes, supported by a range of subthemes and open codes, reveal both the opportunities and challenges in fostering genuinely equitable and accessible formative assessment environments.

The first major theme, fairness and transparency, was repeatedly emphasized by participants as foundational for equity in formative assessment. Students valued clear assessment criteria, bias-free feedback, and consistent application of standards. The availability of rubrics, explicit grading benchmarks, and timely communication were frequently cited as important contributors to students' perceptions of fairness. Confidentiality in grading also emerged as a critical concern, with students expressing appreciation for practices that respected their privacy and dignity. These findings suggest that students not only desire transparency in how assessments are conducted but also expect a level of professional integrity and consistency from educators.

The second theme, accessibility and support, underscored the importance of addressing diverse student needs, particularly those arising from linguistic, physical, or technological barriers. Students highlighted the significance of language accessibility—such as the use of plain language, bilingual resources, and visual aids—as well as the necessity of physical accommodations for students with disabilities. Digital equity, including device and internet access and online assessment support, was also mentioned as essential. Emotional and academic support systems, including encouragement from empathetic teachers, peer support, and availability of study resources, were seen as vital for enabling full participation in formative assessments. Individualized accommodations, such as extra time, alternative formats, and flexible deadlines, were specifically noted as mechanisms that allowed all students to demonstrate their learning adequately.



The third theme, inclusivity and student voice, focused on the need for culturally sensitive, non-discriminatory assessment practices that recognize and value student diversity. Students valued opportunities to contribute feedback on assessment design, participate in peer collaboration, and have their cultural and learning preferences acknowledged. Regular surveys, open feedback channels, and adaptability to various learning styles contributed to students' feelings of inclusion and respect. Group assessments and collaborative projects were also seen as fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility for learning outcomes.

The results of this study align closely with established literature on equity in formative assessment. The strong emphasis students placed on clear assessment criteria and transparency reflects the findings of Black and Wiliam (2009) and Brookhart (2013), who argue that transparency in criteria and grading processes is central to fair assessment. Shepard et al. (2018) similarly highlight that students' understanding of what is being assessed and how they are evaluated is critical for both fairness and motivation. The reported desire for bias-free feedback and confidentiality is echoed by Andrade and Brookhart (2020), who note that formative assessment must be impartial, consistent, and respectful to foster student trust and engagement.

The significance of accessibility and support in the present findings is consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of removing barriers for marginalized or disadvantaged students (Absolum et al., 2009; Sambell et al., 2013). The need for plain language and bilingual resources aligns with Shohamy's (2011) work on multilingual assessment, which argues that linguistic accessibility is a prerequisite for equitable participation. Similarly, issues of digital access and support have become especially pertinent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as highlighted by Huang et al. (2021). These authors demonstrate that inequitable access to technology can exacerbate learning gaps and undermine the potential of formative assessment practices to promote equity.

The theme of inclusivity and student voice finds strong support in contemporary assessment literature. Fielding (2012) and Harris and Brown (2018) both advocate for the integration of student voice into assessment design, arguing that such involvement enhances relevance, fairness, and student ownership of learning. The importance of culturally responsive assessment, as noted by participants, resonates with the work of Ladson-Billings (2006), who posits that educational practices must recognize and build upon students' diverse cultural backgrounds to be truly equitable. Opportunities for peer collaboration and adaptation to learning styles are supported by Dann (2014) and Panadero (2017), who suggest that flexible, student-centered assessment approaches contribute to more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Notably, the findings also point to the persistent challenges in achieving equity and access, even when educators express commitment to these principles. The need for individualized accommodations and ongoing support illustrates the complexity of implementing truly inclusive formative assessment, as suggested by Looney (2011) and Charteris and Smardon (2018). Moreover, the data suggest that while policies and theoretical frameworks for equity exist, their consistent and effective enactment in classrooms remains a challenge, particularly in contexts with limited resources or high student diversity (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2014; OECD, 2018).

Another important insight from the current study is the role of student perceptions as a diagnostic tool for identifying gaps and opportunities in formative assessment practices. While much of the existing research has focused on teacher perspectives, the present findings underscore the value of student voice in both diagnosing and addressing issues of equity (Harris & Brown, 2018). Students' ability to articulate their experiences with fairness, accessibility, and inclusion highlights the need for ongoing dialogue between educators and learners in the design and implementation of assessment practices.

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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 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.

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