

Competence, competition, content and control: Sociological perspectives on educational assessment

The importance of the sociology of assessment

Assessment of all kinds plays a defining role in contemporary global society. In the field of education, as in other aspects of life, people and performances are counted, graded, evaluated and judged for a wide variety of purposes. How and why have such practices evolved? What social purposes do they serve? What are the implications of assessment practices of all kinds for individuals and for segments of society such as different socioeconomic or ethnic groups? What are the implications of assessment policies for global mobility, citizenship and border control? These are some of the important questions about the relationship between education, assessment and society that constitute a 'sociology of assessment'.

As well as pursuing studies that refine the practice of assessment, such as improving the construct validity, representativeness and authenticity of assessment tasks and the reliability of assessment for its various educational purposes, scholars in the field of educational assessment are increasingly recognising the importance of understanding better the *social* role of such practices in education and the various ways in which they profoundly shape it. It is increasingly acknowledged that educational assessment is a deeply social activity, a social construct and a social tool that reflects the needs of a given society at a given time. It is a tool of great social power and needs to be understood as such.

A sociological approach to scrutinising educational assessment provides theoretical and practical tools to challenge the long-established assumption that the language of educational assessment in the form of grades, marks, levels and percentages is objective, accurate, fair, and meaningful. Scholars are increasingly asking pertinent sociological questions, exploring issues such as:

- What social functions does assessment serve?
- How does assessment mediate the relationship between education and society within and across national boundaries and systems?
- How do national assessment systems reflect and defend national interests?
- How is assessment mediated by cultural, educational and political contexts within national educational systems and equally, to what extent is assessment mediated by supranational factors in the global

competition for talent and markets, particularly given the context of international comparisons of educational achievements and standards?

- How does assessment, through its functions of selection, certification/licensure and control, either help to create a meritocracy or rather encourage the social reproduction of structural inequality and unfairness, within a society and across borders? What is its significance in terms of, for example, inequality, surveillance, and the codification of life?
- How does assessment encourage the creation of a social technology and lead to the creation of a technocracy?
- How does assessment as a tool for accountability and legitimation exert its system-wide control and impact on students, teachers and other stakeholders?
- What consequences and impact does any change in assessment policy and practice have on learners and other stakeholders more broadly?
- How may assessment exacerbate performativity or empower learners and citizens as a mediator between its often-self-conflicting functions?
- How can assessment respond ethically and responsibly to technological revolutions such as the advent of large data and generative artificial intelligence?

In short, the question that underpins the sociology of educational assessment is as follows - *how does assessment affect contemporary educational policy, provision and practice?* It asks this question both of national educational systems, and, equally importantly internationally, as it responds to challenges in the global practice of educational assessment by governments, companies and institutions.

It was clear then that a Special Issue devoted to a contemporary examination of the sociology of assessment in both empirical and theoretical terms was pressing. Broadly speaking, the ambitions of the Special Issue were to (a) address these fundamental questions through contributions from around the world that critically evaluated educational assessment policies and practices or empirically explored aspects and examples of a sociology of assessment, (b) demonstrate why it is important to take philosophical and sociological perspectives compared with the psychological approaches to understanding educational assessment, and (c) highlight some uncertainties and changes that are important to consider in order to better understand the sociology of educational assessment, with reference to international large-scale assessment, national assessment, the power of disruptive technology and the commercialisation of assessment. Patricia Broadfoot's seminal

sociological research into educational assessment served as a foundational reference for the Special Issue.

Broadfoot's contribution to the sociology of assessment

In 1979, Broadfoot launched her work on the sociology of assessment in her book, *Assessment, Schools and Society*. Challenging the prevailing psychological orthodoxy centrally concerned with improving the quality of such measurement, Broadfoot's work was perhaps the first, explicit attempt to establish the importance of understanding the social role of educational assessment. In this short book, she explored the historical development of formal educational assessment as it has become inextricably entangled with the systematisation of mass educational provision. She argued that the now familiar and internationally pervasive apparatus of assessment in the form of grades and marks, certificates and credentials, is rooted in the prevailing post-Enlightenment zeitgeist of scientific rationality. As a result, the idea that the relative quality of an educational performance could be translated into a code of letters and numbers, has become so deeply entrenched in modern society that it is now almost inconceivable to imagine educational activity without it. Broadfoot's goal was 'to make the familiar strange'. As a sociologist, she sought to question both why this social phenomenon had become so overwhelmingly dominant in the provision of education and what the implications of this dominance might be for learners, teachers and educational institutions.

Over the decades that have followed, there have been many more or less significant trends in educational assessment policy and practice, which have illustrated the way in which assessment arrangements provide a bridge between educational provision and the needs of society. In the late 1970s, for example, the notion of entitlement to certification for all school-leavers was driven both by a desire to motivate pupils to aspire and, at the same time, to provide employers with information about potential recruits. Subsequent decades have been marked by governments around the world becoming increasingly aware not only of the social role of certification, but also of the power of assessment tools to exert an influence over what should be studied, by whom and to what level. More powerfully still, has been a growing desire to impose accountability on educational institutions and teachers, by using the results of specifically designed tests, as well as of public examinations, to create 'league-tables' of relative quality based on such data.

Broadfoot distilled these various social roles of educational assessment into four core purposes: the attestation of competence, the regulation of competition, the definition of content, and the control of educational systems - in short, 'competence', 'content', 'competition' and 'control'. These four 'C's have provided a framework that has stood the test of time and context. They have enabled a growing number of scholars to recognise the importance of studying the social role of educational assessment as it mediates the relationship between society and educational policy as these develop and change in national settings.

The four 'C's framework was developed at greater length in Broadfoot's 1996 book, *Assessment, Education and Society*. Making reference to major sociological theorists, Broadfoot set the social role of educational assessment within key sociological theories, including using Weber's work to explore its part in the rise of rationality, Durkheim's theories of social control and Bourdieu's work on social reproduction. These analyses demonstrated how the development of educational assessment arrangements needs to be interpreted within a broader sociological understanding of society itself. She argued that the work of Foucault on surveillance and on discourse as power was particularly pertinent to the social role of assessment in contemporary societies.

These early themes in Broadfoot's work were woven through the papers that formed her 'Selected Works' published in 2021. Its title, *The Sociology of Assessment* is a clear statement that there is now such a field - that there is now scholarly recognition of the importance of understanding this major aspect of educational activity as a feature of the discourses, power relations, ideology and agency which drive any given society. The sub-title of the book, *Comparative and Policy Perspectives* refers to the various empirical studies of national educational systems and policy initiatives that illustrate the varying checks and balances between the four 'C's over time and in different contexts in response to changing social pressures and fashions. Not only is formal educational provision now almost inconceivable without its accompanying assessment arrangements, the discourse of evaluation, accountability and league tables has now spread to nearly every aspect of government provision and beyond.

Returning to the sociology of education

At the launch of Broadfoot's (2021) collected works (School of Education, University of Bristol, 2021, see the recording at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVDaiM9r3Rk>), Stephen Ball outlined the

key trends of educational assessment and how assessment has become an increasingly pervasive part of society. He introduced the idea of 'the assessment society' and assessment as a modernist device. Jo-Anne Baird considered the role of assessment in society - its key functions and inherent tensions, the rationality of assessment, assessment as domination and as legitimisation. Tansy Jessop focused on assessment for learning, formative assessment, personalised assessment, digital assessment, and issues and ethics in digital assessment in the "digital revolution", as well as the emotional dimension of assessment.

Broadfoot's work, read afresh for the book launch, still resonated for the speakers due to its expansive theoretical approach. In several senses, the sociology of assessment and empirical work related to it had continued to advance, but there was also a sense that this important field needed to be revisited to both platform and foster new developments. To what extent did Broadfoot's work have longevity? What were the new developments in the field? What challenges will face us in the future that were not addressed?

This Special Issue therefore sought new work that extended or challenged Broadfoot's four 'C's framework. It is a compilation of contemporary sociological research from different geographical perspectives and cultures. We approached a wide range of authors for contributions and selected from the abstracts submitted those which were promising texts, and which jointly would make for an interesting set of papers.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Throughout the Special Issue we are reminded that assessment is inseparable from the conduct of education and that it is far from being a neutral process. Rather governments, international organisations and private enterprises, including edtech businesses, shape the assessment landscape, often aligning it with neoliberal ideologies that emphasise competition, performance metrics, and efficiency. The control that assessment can exert over what happens in schools and classrooms, and the behaviour and beliefs of teachers and pupils, is a theme that runs through the papers. In the lead article Mark Murphy and Christian Ydesen explore a particular form of control - the power of assessment as a tool for *moral* accountability and legitimation. The *moral assemblage* of assessment and accountability consists of disciplinary institutions and practices - testing, inspection, league tables, performance indicators - entwined with facets of moral relationality - blame and shame, trust and risk, recognition and misrecognition, care and safeguarding. Harnessing the affective nature of humans, it has increasingly

come to supplant traditional rational, technocratic approaches to securing legitimation. Murphy and Ydesen establish these arguments through a case study of testing in Denmark. Examining the debates around the reintroduction of testing following the pandemic, they observe competing moral assemblages – whether to secure human well-being or economic growth.

The impact of assessment on well-being surfaces in Thomas Godfrey-Faussett's and Jo-Anne Baird's study of English policymakers', teachers' and pupils' perspectives on what it means to be successful in education. The powerful voices of the participants illustrate the role that assessment has in engendering competition, controlling choices, and creating identities. With differing degrees of acceptance and resistance, participants emphasised the narrative that success can only be achieved through high grades. Godfrey-Faussett and Baird argue that assessment results become the lenses through which we view ourselves and our possible selves. As assessment, while ostensibly a description of reality, also creates reality, they posit a fifth 'C', *creation*, to be added to Broadfoot's framework. Their notion of creation, however, may be conceived as another specific form of control.

The theme of control continues in Michelle Meadows' and Inés Sanguino's analysis of the introduction of standardised tests in Flanders, Belgium. Until recently Flanders had not followed the global trend for governmental control over the content and quality of education via assessment. With constitutionally protected freedom of education and strong school autonomy, Flanders had been an exception, with no standardised tests or end of school examinations. Declining international test outcomes have now been employed to justify the introduction of compulsory standardised tests, to strike a different balance between school autonomy and accountability.

Yan Jin and Guoxing Yu present an insider study of the interplay of competing stakeholders' interests and power dynamics in reforms to China's College English Test, in other words, an analysis of *who* gets to exert control over education. The changes aimed to enhance learners' oral proficiency and ability to translate and convey stories about China's cultural heritage and history. Jin and Yu show how the test has responded to the evolving needs of society, particularly at different phases of the government's open-door policy. They argue for the need to democratise assessment, giving teachers and students more say in reform processes.

These studies of assessment policy and practice in Denmark, England, Flanders and China all demonstrate the endurance of Broadfoot's social

functions of assessment, particularly that of control. Yet the evidence of the social reproduction produced by standardised educational assessment systems, means that opinions are changing and calls to rethink assessment along more equitable lines are growing louder. In his commentary, Randy Bennett reflects on the mismatch between the superdiversity of many nations and traditional assessments. He argues that assessments must be socioculturally responsive - designed for the social and cultural contexts of individuals - and that new, deeply personalised, approaches are necessary if educational assessment is to break the cycle of social reproduction.

The theme of reforming assessment to be more socially just continues in María Teresa Flórez Petour's, Luis Felipe De la Vega's and José Miguel Olave Astorga's paper. They point to evidence that standardised assessment and accountability regimes fail to improve learning; rather they function to legitimise and rationalise the unequal distribution of power and resources in society. Flórez Petour et al, explore different initiatives from a variety of contexts around the world, which might provide ideas as to how a more contextualised, equitable assessment system could be developed and enacted. Low-stakes, contextualised, and more pedagogically relevant assessment systems are highlighted as a better means to respond to demands for social justice in education. To be successful, however, these more flexible approaches will require governments to relinquish their control of education achieved through standardised assessment regimes, and to trust educational professionals to improve learning outcomes.

More flexible approaches to assessment may be made possible by the availability of Generative AI (GenAI). In the final paper in the Special Issue, Patricia Broadfoot and James Rockey focus on the impact of technological advances in GenAI on education and assessment. They argue that as GenAI becomes embedded in education and wider life, the genuine quality of any individual's performance will become blurred. GenAI will require efforts to maintain the *credibility* of assessment systems. They also contend that the impact of GenAI on the skills required in work will place increased importance on assessing *connoisseurship*. People with the skills to evaluate the quality of material produced by GenAI will be in high demand and it is these skills that will need to be assessed. Students will need to recognise that to become connoisseurs, they cannot replace learning with GenAI. This represents a significant challenge to education systems. The future impact of GenAI is uncertain. It has the potential to deliver personalisation - supporting socioculturally responsive and just assessment but only if all learners are equally able to access the technology. It also has the potential to operate as

a form of surveillance, run by corporations with commercial interests and opaque processes. Broadfoot and Rockey demonstrate that we can be certain that it will significantly challenge the social functions of assessment.

From studies such as these, it is clear that educational assessments are now one of the most powerful and pervasive phenomena of contemporary social life in virtually every country in the world. Collectively, the papers offer some partial answers to the fundamental questions asked at the beginning of the Editorial. They demonstrate the power of assessment as a tool for accountability, legitimation and system control; the role of the cultural, educational and political context in mediating assessment policy and practice; issues of structural inequality in assessment; the possible consequences of assessment reform and policy changes for individuals; the potential impact of the digital revolution, the advent of 'big data' and GenAI; and the possible new forms of inequality that might be associated with innovative assessment policies and practices. As such, the papers provide a clear illustration of Broadfoot's four core purposes of educational assessment – the attestation of competence, the regulation of competition, the definition of content and the control of educational systems. The studies also demonstrate the vital importance and benefits of taking philosophical and sociological perspectives, as opposed to psychological approaches, to understand educational assessment more holistically in the system in which it operates and connects with wider national and international political, cultural and policy agendas and imperatives.

Past and future themes in the sociology of assessment

To date much sociology of assessment research has attended to the neoliberal use of assessment for accountability purposes – a lever of control on schools, their teachers and the young people within them. Since Broadfoot's early work, much more is known about the effects of accountability regimes on curriculum, pedagogy, teachers' professional roles and learners' educational experiences. These effects have been documented internationally. There has also been much sociological interest in the expansion of international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), operated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), or the International Association for Educational Achievement's (IEA) tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) or the Progress in International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS). A great deal of the

work in the sociology of assessment has been conducted on the effects of these ILSAs on agenda-setting, policy borrowing, mapping the actors and their interests and their use as a political rhetorical device (see for example, Baird et al, 2016). Indeed, ILSAs have shifted the focus of the field from the national to the international, giving us a deeper understanding of their effects and a language with which to discuss them. At a national level, ILSA sociological research has tended to focus on policy rather than on national assessments and their sociological effects. As such, the distancing effect that ILSAs have had between curriculum, learning and assessment can also be observed in the lack of attention to national assessments, which are, after all, the tests which most people experience, and which have a profound impact on life trajectories. Broadfoot, too, published on ILSAs and their effects (see 2021), but her theory also focussed specifically on national developments, especially in England. Consequently, the sociological linkages with individuals and groups in society were more direct.

But what is the future of sociological assessment research? Assessment systems can be deeply conservative, embedded in culture and history (Isaacs, 2018). Fundamental change is unusual; however, a global confluence of economic, political, social and technological factors has contributed to a more uncertain landscape. Future research on the social functions of educational assessment will need to respond to the societal changes ahead. These changes will impact the research agenda, theorisation and empirical approaches. We illustrate these uncertainties with reference to national assessment in the context of increasing populism and nationalism, the commercialisation of assessment, the impact of disruptive technology, and the power of assessment as a social technology.

The papers in this Special Issue have shown that despite calls for more socially just assessment practices, many governments around the world continue to leverage standardised assessment to control education systems and those who participate in them. Over the past decade, however, technological advances have driven a global shift towards digital learning and assessment solutions, fuelling significant growth in the ed-tech sector. Like other disruptive technologies, ed-tech has the power to do more than change assessment; it may reshape societies, offering unprecedented opportunities, while posing challenges related to ethics, regulation, and adaptation. National educational systems may face competition from

international ed-tech providers, potentially leading to the homogenisation of curricula. Traditional schools may struggle to compete with global platforms offering more flexible, affordable options. Importantly, while democratically elected governments are subject to mechanisms of accountability, global ed-tech enterprises, as private entities, operate without comparable public oversight.

The outsourcing of national assessments to ed-tech businesses may bring the potential for enhanced quality and attractive commercial opportunities, but it seems probable that governments will resist a wholesale loss of control of the content and process of assessment. Yet, if governments entirely fail to embrace the opportunities offered by ed-tech, including opportunities for the enhanced authenticity of assessment, there is a risk that national qualification systems will be seen as failing to deliver the '21st century' skills required by the economy. This could undermine their currency. Recognised national qualifications may be increasingly replaced by micro-credentials aligned with specific workforce demands. In this changing context, the relationship between ed-tech and national governments will continue to be a fertile area for sociological research (see for example, Lingard et al, 2019).

At the same time, linked to the global rise of populism, many societies face growing scepticism toward evidence-based decision-making, scientific methods, and rational discourse. There is even evidence of a disenchantment with democracy. Populist discourse and policies often appeal to emotions rather than rational, technocratic planning to gain public support. Populist governments position themselves in opposition to perceived elites and as antitechnocratic. In this Special Issue, Murphy and Ydesen note that as traditional appeals to efficiency, rationality, and professionalism become less effective, moral forces have become crucial for governments to effect desired educational outcomes.

However, the flavour of populism within any nation will be likely to influence the emphasis placed on the different social functions of educational assessment. While right-wing populism is often authoritarian, with nationalistic tendencies, leftist populism focuses on economic inequality and social justice. The Covid-19 pandemic intensified concerns about social justice, highlighting and exacerbating existing inequalities across various sectors, but the path from societal concerns to assessment policy reform is long and winding. Concerns with social justice have arisen in the context of other macro changes.

The trend toward globalisation over the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has led to fears over national identity, sovereignty, and traditional values, triggering a resurgence of nationalism. Populist leaders such as Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and Narendra Modi (India) have embraced nationalist rhetoric to consolidate power. Populist leaders often emphasise the importance of national history, culture, and traditional values in curricula. Educational assessment provides a powerful nation building tool; by controlling the content of education it determines legitimate knowledge and sets cultural expectations. If, however, segments of society are excluded by the design and content of assessment, nationhood consolidation will surely be undermined. The link between political change, social values and the use of assessment to create socially just outcomes (perhaps in the form of a kind of contextualised meritocracy) or to sift, rank and sort (a traditional, credentialist form of meritocracy (Penn, 2024)) is a rich area for further exploration.

The various papers in this Issue make it clear that major changes in the social role of educational assessment lie ahead. Globalisation, the changing nature of work, potential shifts in the balance of power between governments and mega-corporations and above all, the ever-increasing reach of AI, suggest that there will be transformative change in the delivery of education and indeed in every aspect of social life. Equally transformative is likely to be the potential for change in the delivery of educational assessment.

Given the scale and significance of these developments, it will be vital that their actual and potential impact is studied and, if necessary, addressed. If Broadfoot's work in establishing the importance of a sociological perspective on educational assessment was key to challenging the domination of the previous technocratic paradigm, the stakes now are arguably very much higher. Whilst the history of educational assessment has been associated with promoting equity and opportunity, in the future it will be important to see it as equally likely to be associated with social control.

The powerful new AI technologies now emerging offer both huge opportunities for the development of more useful approaches to educational assessment but equally, fundamental threats to equity and personal freedom. It is therefore essential that there is the capacity for a lively critique of such developments as they emerge. This critique cannot be solely the preserve of scholars in the assessment community. The issues involved are far too multi-faceted, far too interdisciplinary, for this to be desirable.

Rather, awareness of the overwhelming power of educational assessment ultimately to control individual lives, needs to be recognised and studied by social scientists of all kinds. Equally important is the awareness of other stakeholders such as regulators, policymakers and test designers, of the insidious power of greatly enhanced assessment tools. It is vital that those responsible for the design and delivery of educational assessments, especially where this is on a commercial basis, have an informed awareness of their potential individual and social impact and then take this into account in decisions made.

We are witnessing the beginnings of a 'disruptive technology' - new ways of doing things that are likely to overturn established practices and possibly too, established views of what is desirable, reasonable or ethical. This is already an emergent trend in warfare. It may soon become a powerful trend in the way education is organised and especially, assessed. The established assessment orthodoxy of scientific rationality is increasingly being challenged in many parts of the world by political, social and moral currents that do not prioritise such principles. Perhaps most insidious among the many threats facing society in this respect is that of the commercialisation of educational assessment leading to the development of educational assessments driven by the pursuit of profit and market-share, rather than any benefit to learning. The rapid development of GenAI and with it, a new language of learning and new principles of authenticity, arguably heralds the advent of such commercialisation. Arguably too, it is a harbinger of the new forms of control to come through developments in educational assessment which will have consequences for thinking and practice in this field more profound than any previous innovation.

Building on Broadfoot's four 'C's

From the contributions to this Special Issue, it has become clear that we need to add to Broadfoot's four 'C's of competence, competition, content and control, several more 'c's - sub categories of purpose that cluster under these main headings but which may well be developed further conceptually in the future. These sub 'c's include concepts that have emerged from the papers in this issue - connoisseurship, creation, credibility and commercialisation. There may be more. It is already clear however, that there is a rich seam of theoretical, empirical and comparative opportunities for research waiting to be pursued to develop a greater critical awareness of the potential of these powerful new developments.

As the papers in this Special Issue collectively make clear, far too often national decisions about policy and practice concerning educational assessment are taken for the wrong reasons such as cost or political expediency. The result is a failure to recognise the unforeseen and often undesirable consequences of the decisions made. If this Special Issue on the sociology of assessment achieves nothing else, it will have achieved its purpose if it leads to a much greater awareness of the key social role played by educational assessment. It is to be hoped that as such awareness grows, so will the commitment by all the different parties involved in this enterprise not to use this powerful social technology heedless of its more fundamental impact on society.

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