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Assessment literacy and critical consciousness

Catarina F. Correia

IoE - Faculty of Education and Society, Department for Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential of *critical consciousness* to transform teachers' and students' relationship with educational assessment. Assessment is used as a technology for regulation and control in education. Educational assessment embodies two different and potentially contradictory discourses in the classroom: one where *all* students are capable learners with potential to develop and grow; and another where some students become winners and losers in a context of limited resources. These discourses are also shaped by social constructions of class, gender, and race, and place significant oppressive pressures on students and teachers. Current conceptions of teacher assessment literacy do not sufficiently prepare teachers to navigate these oppressive pressures and contradictions, and to challenge and resist policies and practices that shape these. The concept of critical consciousness can be used to support the development of greater critical engagement and of teacher activism, in relation to assessment. In this context, the responsibility for change in assessment policies and practices can be organised and distributed between the individual and the collective.

KEYWORDS

Educational assessment; assessment literacy; critical consciousness; teacher education; critical pedagogy

Introduction

This paper explores the potential of the concept of *critical consciousness* to transform teachers' and students' relationship with educational assessment. Assessment is used as a technology for regulation and control in education (e.g. see Meadows et al., 2025). In the classroom, assessment is portrayed along two different and potentially contradictory discourses. On the one hand, there is a discourse that uses assessment to position *all* students as capable learners with potential to develop and grow. Rejecting views of fixed intelligence, this discourse is underpinned by the concept of mastery learning. This concept supports that all students can make progress (albeit at different rates) if they are given adequate support (Bloom, 1968). On the other hand, the use of assessment results constructs perceptions of success and failure (Richardson, 2022). Associated with this are, for example, test results which are used to monitor and stream students. The construction of failure often positions students

CONTACT Catarina F. Correia a.correia@ucl.ac.uk Ioe - Faculty of Education and Society, Department for Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment, University College London, London, UK

as subjects in need of intervention (Bradbury et al., 2021). Streaming students using assessment results often leads to grouping practices that result in different experiences for students in terms of teacher expectations and pedagogy. These materialise in different educational opportunities (Francis et al., 2019). In a simplistic way, the first discourse suggests opportunities for all, while the second reveals a reality where not everyone gets the same opportunities. This tension is well known (e.g. see Ball, 2021). The two discourses are mediated by social constructions of class (Reay, 2006), race (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022) and gender (Pollard & Filer, 2010). While the construction of students as a subject of intervention is legitimised by a concern to reduce the achievement gap, it can work against it (Carlson, 2006). As such, assessment can be seen as a technology for student oppression.

Managerial and performativity pressures impose a continuous surveillance of students' performance. This results in teachers having to walk on a tight-rope between their commitment to support students' development and having to invest significant effort and time in feeding performance monitoring systems (e.g. see Goodley & Perryman, 2022). These monitoring systems narrow down student development to 'measurable' academic attainment based on test results (Biesta, 2015). In this context, educational quality is equated with academic performance, and teachers' effectiveness is often judged against assessment results. In this situation, assessment can be seen as a technology for teacher oppression.

Paulo Freire's work on critical consciousness is situated in a struggle against capitalism and its oppression for the working- class (Freire, 1970). The concept of critical consciousness is used here to reflect on how teacher education can support teachers in challenging capitalist oppression which uses assessment as a technology to regulate and control teachers and students (Ball, 2003) and reproduce social injustice (Carlson, 2006). In such systems, *assessment* becomes an instrument of oppression which contributes to managerial and performativity cultures and the myth of meritocracy (Owens & de St Croix, 2020). This has detrimental effects on the mental health and well-being of students (Reay & Wiliam, 1999) and teachers (Ball, 2003), and it profoundly transforms what it means to be a learner and a teacher.

This paper is centred around two key arguments:

- Current teacher assessment literacy conceptions offer limited support to understand and challenge the use of assessments as a technology for regulation and social control.
- The concept of critical consciousness can promote more teacher critical engagement and action in assessment spaces.

The first argument reflects on current conceptions of teacher assessment literacy discussing how they largely promote the status quo in relation to educational assessment. This is achieved by promoting a form of teacher engagement with assessment which has some degree of autonomy within the classroom, but which is largely compliant with existing systems set by schools and national policies. The second argument draws on the concept of *critical consciousness* which seeks the building of awareness and taking action to resist and change oppressive systems. It discusses how critical consciousness, through critical

pedagogy, can support teachers' critical engagement with assessment both within and beyond their classroom practice, to take political action to bring about change.

Background

This paper starts with a brief discussion on how assessment is used as a technology to regulate and control teachers and students. This discussion is situated in the context of England where external standardised high-stakes testing is used for accountability purposes. The points made in this section are also relevant to other jurisdictions where education is dominated by testing regimes.

High-stakes test results are primarily used: 1) to monitor and regulate students' progress; 2) to certify students' achievement; and 3) as an indicator of educational quality (Newton, 2007). For example, GCSE[1] results (for students aged 15–16 years old), are used to make decisions around educational quality, school autonomy, and budgeting (Leckie & Goldstein, 2017). The SATs[2] results are used for educational interventions, student triage, and 'ability' grouping practices (Bradbury et al., 2021). Test results and other performance indicators are also used to make predictions on future attainment and to make decisions about students' choice and access to GCSE subjects (Barrance & Elwood, 2018). The examples above demonstrate the importance that our governance systems accord to test results. The logic behind this reliance lies on two assumptions. The first is that testing gives us a fair and valid measure of students' academic progress and achievement (Stobart, 2008). The second is that testing can inform us about the quality of teaching. Underlying this assumption is a strong association between educational quality, which is equated with teachers' effectiveness, and improved student academic outcomes for all (Towers et al., 2022). In a simplified way, the message is: If we keep track of students' progress and quality of teaching through forms of standardised testing, then we can design interventions that will close the achievement gap. However, this logic is flawed because of: 1) the limitations of testing (Koretz, 2008); 2) a narrow view of the purpose and value of education which is reduced to academic achievement as measured by tests (Biesta, 2015); and 3) pitfalls of ideas of meritocracy which do not account for systemic institutionalised structures that sustain the achievement gap (Owens & de St Croix, 2020).

Contradictions in assessment discourses and its impact on student well-being

This paper will now discuss a specific example of how students can experience assessment as an oppressive force. As mentioned in the introduction, educational assessment constructs two potentially contradictory discourses in the classroom. The first one, which I call *capability for all*, is centred around the ways in which assessment supports learning (see, e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998; Dann, 2014). The second one, which I call *winners and losers*, is associated with the construction of success and failure in a game of limited resources (see, e.g., Ball, 2021; Torrance, 2017). On the one hand, formative use of assessment information supports pedagogical decision-making which ideally results in better informed teaching (Black, 1998, 2018). This underpins an idea of students' continued development and positions learning as an ongoing process, as assessment information is used to inform next steps in learning. The frequency of formative assessment means that previous decisions can be superseded by new ones

which arise from new information. Here, there is a sense of possibility and continuity. On the other hand, summative use of assessment results reports on what has been achieved at a given point in time. It is typically used for certification and selection purposes (Harlen & James, 1997), suggesting a sense of something rather more definitive. Summative assessment positions learning as a product that can be captured and judged at a particular point in time, and this can evoke a sense of success or failure. One could argue that while one may cultivate a mastery-oriented mindset, there will be instances where judgements are made based on snapshots of performance, and the two do not necessarily oppose one another. In fact, together, formative and summative assessment contribute to learning. Nevertheless, despite the co-existence of these two dominant narratives, the 'winners and losers' discourse usually takes hold in systems dominated by testing. In these, high-stakes examinations are imbued with *prophetic* qualities such as the making or breaking of one's future (Richardson, 2022). There is also evidence that teachers, under the weight of accountability pressures, sometimes adopt oppressive strategies like 'threat-fear appeals' to make students comply with assessment requirements (Putwain et al., 2017).

These contradictions in assessment discourses can have devastating mental health and well-being consequences to, for example, students labelled as working-class. Reay and Wiliam (1999) and Hargreaves et al. (2022) provide two poignant examples of how high-stakes testing can trigger strong negative affective reactions in such children. Their accounts are shocking because they show how these experiences with assessment are imbued with so much pain and anxiety. Children make strong associations between their test results and their sense of worth, as well as fears over their future. In this context, performativity places the burden of responsibility for success on the child, and the oppression becomes internalised, affecting the child's perceptions of herself and her aspirations. This description is somewhat simplistic, and empirical research suggests a more complex and nuanced picture (e.g. Pollard & Filer, 2010). This is because learning and assessment are interweaved and create unique lived experiences (Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003).

Resisting the dominance of testing

This paper does not take a position against testing, per se. Testing has a very important place in monitoring and supporting students' learning (Harlen & James, 1997; Stobart, 2008). However, it follows a well-established tradition in critiquing the use of testing as a technology to manipulate and regulate teachers and students in ways that are detrimental to their development and well-being (e.g. Ball, 2021; Broadfoot, 2021; Stobart, 2008; Torrance, 2017). Teacher education programmes do not necessarily prepare student-teachers to recognise the misuse of assessment and resist it, and this is why a more critical engagement with assessment is necessary.

Resistance to the dominance of testing is not new. We continue to witness within academic circles, professional bodies, and social action groups a willingness to get organised and take concrete actions against the distorted use of testing and test results. This is evidenced, for example, in the *More Than a Score* campaign, which successfully advocated for reducing early years testing in Statutory Assessments in England. Santori and Holloway (2023) have studied how this coalition of parent and professional

organisations influenced policy and practice by mobilising expert knowledge as a tool for resistance. Santori and Holloway give us several examples of social mobilisation for action against high-stakes testing, in different jurisdictions.

There is a need for more generalised critical engagement with educational assessment involving teachers, parents, senior leaders, awarding organisations, academics, and policymakers (Richardson, 2022). Situated in this context, this paper will now explore ways to enhance teachers' critical engagement with assessment by revisiting conceptions of assessment literacy, and by discussing the role of *critical consciousness* in developing teacher assessment literacy.

Critical consciousness can be achieved through the recognition and challenging of oppressive social systems (Freire, 1970). It relies on an awareness of how context can control individuals' development and potential, and on a willingness and understanding of how to act towards changing the context. But, how would this apply to teachers' critical engagement with assessment? If we consider the promotion of social justice, then an understanding of how assessment creates distorted narratives of who gets to succeed and in what conditions is of paramount importance. Equally important is the acquisition and development of the language and tools to challenge these narratives and build more empowering and socially just ones. The next section discusses conceptions of teacher assessment literacy and their current limitations to support critical engagement both in relation to testing, well-being, and social justice.

Teacher assessment literacy and critical engagement with assessment

In the backdrop of increasing standardised testing in the US, Stiggins (1991) advocated for stakeholder education in assessment. Assessment literacy could promote a more critical engagement with assessment and mitigate the misuse of test results. At the core of teacher assessment literacy are knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable and enhance teacher engagement in educational assessment (Pastore, 2023). Assessment literacy is context-dependent, culturally situated, and specific to the roles played by teachers (Willis et al., 2013). There are several models of teacher assessment literacy (Pastore, 2023). Among these, the conceptualisation of teacher assessment literacy (in the context of teacher education) by Xu and Brown (2016) is a seminal contribution to the field. The TALiP framework (Teacher Assessment Literacy in Practice) not only provides a comprehensive overview of key areas of knowledge in assessment literacy, but it also identifies issues with their implementation within teacher education. Therefore, TALiP will be briefly analysed below in terms of its potential to promote critical engagement with educational assessment.

The TALiP framework is represented as a pyramid of components of teacher assessment literacy which build up to support teachers in reconstructing their identity as assessors. This comes from a recognition that teachers' acquisition of knowledge around assessment principles and purposes is not enough if it does not lead to changes in beliefs and attitudes in relation to their role as assessors (Xu & Brown, 2016). Teachers need to be supported in making sense of those ideas within their own contexts and in negotiating tensions that arise from: 1) their role as curriculum facilitators and assessors, and student carers (Cowie, 2012); and 2) their beliefs and conceptions around assessment (Barnes

et al., 2014). Promoting teacher assessment literacy requires a dynamic and sustained long-term learning process.

At the bottom of the TALiP framework is the *Assessment Knowledge* base with its seven different components. These are briefly elaborated on below. The first one is *Disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge*; both are very important because assessment is a situated practice, and it requires both domain-general and domain-specific knowledge (Wiliam, 2019). The second is *Knowledge about assessment purposes, content, and methods*. This knowledge is directly related to learning goals in the curriculum, and in deploying adequate assessment strategies to monitor the achievement of learning goals. The third is *Knowledge about scoring, grading, and moderation*. This component is particularly important for summative assessment. The fourth and fifth ones are *Knowledge about both purposes and sound practices around feedback* and *Knowledge about supporting students with peer- and self-assessment*. Feedback, self- and peer-assessment are three of the five key strategies in formative assessment that have a potential to promote students' learning and improve academic outcomes (Wiliam & Thompson, 2008). Finally, the assessment knowledge base contains two other components: *Knowledge around assessment interpretation and communication*, and *Knowledge about ethical assessment*. *Knowledge about assessment interpretation and communication* involves a good understanding around the quality of the validity argument that supports specific interpretations based on assessment information. It also involves knowledge and skills required to communicate this to different stakeholders (e.g. students and parents) in ways that minimise misinterpretation and misuse of that information. Finally, in terms of ethics of assessment, teachers need to know about ethical storage, use, and dissemination of assessment results, and how to promote assessment practices that are inclusive and socially just.

This closer look into the TALiP assessment knowledge base suggests that the first six knowledge base components are related to the practicalities of facilitating sound assessments in the context of teaching and learning activities in the classroom, and communicating about these (within the school and with parents). These components inform functional aspects of assessment practices within teaching-related activities.

These functional aspects have important implications on the construction of assessment narratives. They shape the spaces in which assessment takes place and therefore can have an important impact on students. As an example, consider how formative assessment can shape the learning environment and contribute to assessment narratives around competence and participation in learning (Cowie, 2012). Teachers can also promote more inclusive and fair assessment practices, such as a dialogic approach to classroom assessment, which relies on more dialogue and co-construction of meanings (e.g. Torrance & Pryor, 2001), and which can have important impacts on student inclusion and equity. It seems that the first six elements of the TALiP knowledge base can to some extent contribute to teachers' critical engagement with assessment, for example in relation to the dominance of testing. But they do so in an implicit way, as the priority of formative assessment is to support teachers in sound instructional decision-making, contributing to the regulation of learning (e.g. Allal, 2010; Black & Wiliam, 2018; Correia & Wiliam, 2025). This supports students' autonomy and self-regulation, as well as academic achievement.

The seventh component of the TALiP assessment knowledge base relates to the ethics of assessment and includes important considerations around validity and fairness in assessment. When considering the validity of classroom assessments, it helps to categorise them in two dimensions: function (formative or summative) and form. The validity of the assessment form is associated with the format and transience of the information gathered. As an example, informal assessments such as teacher questioning typically elicit oral responses from students (Shavelson et al., 2008). This form of assessment information is typically short-lived, not recorded, and used on the spot. Therefore, it is not amenable to scrutiny. This is not to say that it is less valid (see the argument in Correia & Wiliam, 2025). More formal assessments that elicit, for example, written responses from students often rely on artefacts that can be stored and scrutinised at a later stage (Brown, 2019). Teachers need to have a good understanding of how these different forms of assessment information can be used to draw inferences about student learning in ways that are warranted. In terms of fairness in classroom assessment, Tierney (2014) identified four key areas for evaluating fairness in assessment. These are: students' opportunities to access learning and demonstrate their learning; transparency over assessment processes and practices; teacher critical reflection; and equitable treatment of students. Teachers' considerations around validity and fairness in assessment are fundamental for teachers' critical engagement with assessment, but again they seem to be geared towards teachers' scrutiny of their own assessment practices, in the context of their classrooms, and not so much towards structural and systemic issues within assessment systems in which they operate.

In summary, current conceptions of teacher assessment literacy seem to be geared towards local decision-making (within teachers' own classroom practices). They are not geared to: 1) critique existing assessment structures; 2) challenge systemic issues in assessment; 3) work towards change, extending critical engagement and action in relation to school assessment policies and national assessment policies.

There is a clear separation between the education of teachers for the teaching profession, and the education of teachers for political activity, in matters related to assessment. A discussion on the appropriateness of this separation is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it must be considered, as well as the implications that arise from combining the two, if there is to be a push for promoting the development of critical consciousness in assessment. There will be important ethical issues associated with the role of teachers which have not been considered in this paper. These need to be explored further.

Critical consciousness in assessment literacy

To promote more critical engagement with assessment, we need to explicitly educate teachers to view their local engagement and interactions with assessment as part of a broader political picture of promoting well-being, equity, and social justice for all. The concept of 'conscientização', also known as critical consciousness, can provide a way to develop this.

Critical consciousness was first introduced by Paulo Freire in the context of adult literacy. For Freire, critical consciousness is the key to socio-cultural, economical, and political emancipation of marginalised and oppressed individuals, and towards the creation of more just and equitable societies (Freire, 1970, 2021a). Building on the work of Alvaro Pinto, Freire defines critical consciousness as representing 'things and facts as they

exist empirically in their causal and circumstantial correlation' (Freire, 2021b, p. 41), and 'as they (individuals) apprehend a phenomenon or a problem, they also apprehend their causal links. The more accurately men grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be' (Freire, 2021b, p. 41). Taking this to the realm of teacher assessment literacy, critical consciousness offers a pathway to develop a more political understanding of how assessment practices construct and maintain assessment systems, who benefits from it, who is included/excluded, and of understanding one's own position within those systems. It offers a space for teachers to reflect on how their practices promote/hinder inclusiveness and social justice, but also a space to resist pressures imposed by performativity and managerial ethos within the profession.

Critical consciousness can be developed through critical pedagogy. According to Henry Giroux, critical pedagogy:

> is concerned with providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities first to question the deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the archaic and disempowering social practice . . . and then to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit. (Giroux, 2010, p. 718)

Horizontal dialogue is at the core of critical pedagogy, as a fundamental process for engaging in an exploration of one's own lived reality and that of others. It creates a safe space for a renegotiation of ideas. The idea of safe space in dialogue is very important in Freire's thought. Genuine dialogue requires humility and respect towards the other, and a genuine consideration and engagement with other perspectives and points of view (Freire, 2021a, 2021b).

Critical pedagogy can be used to support teachers in reflecting on discourses around assessment, their assessment practices, and their own assessment experiences too. What kinds of knowledge, skills, dispositions are needed to develop critical consciousness in assessment? How would we put it into practice? These questions have yet to be explored. This paper aims to initiate a conversation around this by briefly discussing existing literature in the context of critical pedagogy in teacher education and critical race theory.

In teacher education, critical pedagogy has been instrumental in promoting teacher awareness and activism (Oyler et al., 2017). However, critical pedagogy in teacher education is not mainstream. This is because this type of pedagogy pushes back against well-established and traditional forms of teacher education which rely on top-down transmission of knowledge (Bartolomé, 2004). These are used as tools to regulate and produce teacher compliance (Oyler et al., 2017). For Bartolomé, critical pedagogy in teacher education works towards the promotion of 'political clarity' as an:

> ongoing process by which individuals achieve ever-deepening consciousness of the socio-political and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to transform such material and symbolic conditions. . . . process by which individuals come to understand the possible linkages between macro-level political, economic, and social variables and subordinated groups' academic performance in the micro-level classroom. (Bartolomé, 2004, p. 10)

The operationalisation of critical consciousness has been studied in the context of adult literacy and antiracism education. Of the two, critical-race theory possibly offers a clearer conceptualisation of the different dimensions of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness involves a combination of 'critical social analysis, collective social identity, political-self efficacy, and actions aimed at advancing social justice' (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado,

2015, p. 848). Critical social analysis is related to the acquisition of knowledge and analysis of oppressive structures, and the use of that understanding to critique the observed reality. Collective social identity is associated with an identification of belonging to a particular group of people that share some common experiences and have a sense of shared culture (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Collective identity is a powerful mobiliser for collective action. Political self-efficacy is associated with the development of a sense of both personal and community-level capability to effect change (Watts et al., 2011). According to Watts and Hipolito-Delgado, 'The development of political self-efficacy entails a growing a sense of confidence or a motive to take action to improve one's status in society' (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 849). Finally, critical action is associated with engaging in activities that challenge oppressive conditions and may lead to change. Watts et al. (2011) describe it as the promotion of change in social and institutional policies or practices that maintain an inferior status for members of marginalised groups. As noted previously, 'sociopolitical action may lead more directly to systemic change, but actions at the personal or group levels contribute as well' (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 850). Social critical analysis, collective identity, and political self-efficacy are often considered as precursors to critical action. But critical action further enables those three also, so these four dimensions are best conceptualised as intertwined in one another (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). In terms of teacher assessment literacy, it is not just about supporting teachers to become more conscious of the political dimensions of assessment systems they inhabit and in which they operate; it is equally important to support teachers in taking both individual and collective action against aspects that lead to social injustice and oppression.

One fundamental aspect that must be considered is that teacher education for critical consciousness in assessment is not just about teaching about inclusive pedagogies and assessments. Critical consciousness requires teacher activism. Teacher activism relies on identity construction (Oyler et al., 2017). As such, teacher educators need to create educational spaces that: 1) foster critical consciousness against systemic oppression produced by assessment; 2) connect teachers with communities for collective action; and 3) support teachers 'to envision and build systems of schooling that create and sustain a more just society … teacher educators are not just educating about activism, they engage in it with their students' (Oyler et al., 2017, p. 6).

Narrative creation and sharing are common pedagogical approaches to support the development of teacher as an activist. The power of the construction of life narratives is that it enables individuals to articulate their own experiences and be confronted with those of others, through discussion. This opens a space for considering multiple perspectives, and is equally important to develop empathy for others. There is a clear link here between the use of narratives and critical reflection. Critical reflection has been advocated as a fundamental component of teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Critical reflection enables student teachers to develop their identity as assessors (Looney et al., 2018), and to reflect on their own assessment practices (DeLuca et al., 2024; Harrison, 2005).

Elements of critical reflection are also built into more recent approaches to teacher assessment literacy. DeLuca et al. (2013) empirically derived four key pedagogical elements to support pre-service teachers in developing their assessment literacy. These are: 1) incorporating perspective-building conversations; 2) praxis

(connecting assessment theory with assessment practices); 3) modelling good assessment practice and reflection; and 4) critical reflection and planning for learning. These elements are put into practice in a dialogical environment, where group and whole class discussions create spaces for student teachers and teacher educators to articulate their understandings and positions, and to debate these, considering multiple perspectives. This approach is used to promote discussions, and reflections are geared towards student-teachers' and teacher educators' assessment practices within the classroom.

Connecting the above to the development of the teacher as an activist, such an approach could be used to start reflecting on assessment more critically. For that to happen, it must go beyond discussing practice in the classroom, such as: What assessments would be appropriate to support given the intended learning outcomes? How do these assessments engage and support my students in developing a sense of competence in relation to a particular area of the curriculum? These are very important per se, but, as argued above, they are not enough to encourage teachers to act beyond those specific aspects of practice.

Critical reflection in assessment needs to include an element of social analysis in the context of educational assessment. This critical analysis would focus on deconstructing ways of thinking about educational assessment more broadly. These could be discussions around teachers' awareness of power issues in assessment (in and out of the classroom), or inherent tensions between summative and formative uses of assessment in school assessment policies, and how that affects assessment-related decisions in the classroom, namely in relation to different groups of students. Another example could be to deconstruct assessment discourses such as 'standardised testing is the most valid and fair way to assess students' learning', by reflecting on what this means for different groups of students.

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, critical consciousness can only be developed through a synergy between reflection and activism. The latter will now be discussed. There are few studies that explore how teacher education can support teachers to become activists. Boundary crossing is seen as a fundamental idea in promoting teacher activism. Zeichner and Payne (2013), cited in Oyler et al. (2017), refer to the importance of creating hybrid teacher education spaces to enable teachers to cross the boundary between teacher education and social action projects. The idea of boundary crossing is very important here because it provides a theoretical framework to understand how teachers can move between spaces of reflection about assessment practices to spaces of political action to change those practices.

A theoretical exploration of what this could mean for teacher activism in relation to assessment is beyond the scope of this article, but it is fundamental if one wishes to take these ideas forward. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) conceptualise boundary crossing in educational practice as relying on four key learning processes: identification; coordination; reflection; and transformation. Identification starts with a recognition that activities involve different practices, and becoming aware of how one's practice compares to that of others. Coordination allows for an articulation of how one's own practice can coexist with other practices. Reflection relies on understanding the fundamental differences between those different practices. Finally, transformation takes place as these different learning processes lead to profound changes into one's own practice.

In their literature review, Oyler et al. (2017) provide examples of boundary crossing between teacher education and social action projects through the involvement of student-teachers with grassroots projects, university-based student groups, and not-for-profit organisations. All examples discussed in Oyler et al. (2017) involved democratic participatory approaches, with equitable distribution of power, to develop these group activities. These practices are at the core of how social action projects grow and of how teachers develop their identity as activists. While, as mentioned above, there is a record of academics' involvement with groups that seek to reform aspects of educational testing, such as *More than a Score* (Santori & Holloway, 2023), we have yet to explore how this could be put into practice in the context of teacher education and assessment literacy more broadly.

One starting point to think about developing critical consciousness in assessment is to explicitly educate teachers in critical analysis that explores the intersection of assessment with social justice. This requires an understanding of how assessments can contribute to a push for social justice, and, at the same time, a reproduction of social injustice (Ladson-Billings, 2006). An example of how assessments can support social justice is illustrated by the use of standardised test results to plan for additional educational support for specific groups of students. At the same time, testing also contributes (inadvertently) to perpetuate stereotypes around the academic ability of African-American males (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Stereotype threat is a form of cognitive load, where individuals' raised awareness of deficit narratives can have a negative impact on their academic performance (Steele, 2011, cited in Seider et al., 2020).

Another important consideration is the importance of intersectionality in the development of critical consciousness (Godfrey & Burson, 2018). The concept of intersectionality was first proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (2013) in 1989, in the context of black women's experiences of marginalisation within the black emancipation and feminist movements. Intersectionality considers how multiple systems of oppression (e.g. race, gender, class, sexuality, and ableism) interact with one another and create very different and unique experiences for individuals and communities. In discussions about, for example, deficit narratives in assessment, it is fundamental to acknowledge these differences. This also opens an area to reflect, for example, within the classroom whose voices are being represented? These are complex issues that do not tend to be addressed in depth in teacher education, specifically in the context of assessment. They are discussed around equity principles which primarily focus on pedagogies of inclusion.

Conclusions and implications

Teacher assessment literacy conceptions largely promote a functional and compliant engagement with assessment, equipping teachers to operate within existing assessment structures, but not to explicitly question and challenge these same structures. This is not to say that teachers do not have autonomy in assessment; teachers do have some degree of autonomy. Literature on Assessment for Learning (AfL) and teacher education and professional development has been promoting teachers' ownership of assessment practices (see, e.g., Black et al., 2003; Harrison, 2005; Serret & Correia, 2023). Teachers can carve out assessment spaces in the classroom that support learning and promote students'

autonomy and self-regulation (Willis & Cowie, 2014), as opposed to other forms of assessment more concerned with simply monitoring and recording students' academic attainment. Having said this, despite the policy efforts to support AfL implementation in England, teachers still operate in moderate to highly constrained environments set by schools' policies. These environments are heavily influenced by accountability pressures (Maguire et al., 2020).

Things are changing, and the recent conceptualisation of teacher assessment capacity (DeLuca et al., 2024), with its epistemic, ethical embodiment and experiential dimensions, offers news ways of thinking about supporting teachers to develop more critical awareness in assessment. Although one could argue that the Assessment Capacity Framework has the potential to create critical awareness, it does not necessarily address the issue of supporting teachers to act in assessment spaces in organised and collective ways. In other words, the burden of resistance and change is placed largely on the individual, and more emphasis is given to a reflection than to actual action-taking. The framework encourages taking action, but in a localised way, which seems to be more bounded to the individual. The conceptions of critical consciousness in assessment, as discussed in this paper, distributes the onus of reflection and action between the individual and the collective.

Promoting more critical consciousness in relation to assessment requires genuine dialogue between teachers and other stakeholders such as teacher educators, school leaders, teacher professional organisations, awarding and regulatory bodies, and of course, students. Any effort towards identifying and categorising what kinds of issues, knowledge, and skills are needed for this level of critical reflection needs to start with these conversations.

Notes

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Notes on contributor

Catarina F. Correia is a Lecturer in Educational Assessment in the Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment at the UCL Institute of Education. She is also the route lead for the MA in Education (Assessment). With a PhD in physical chemistry, she began her career as an educational researcher in 2012, working in science curriculum development at the Freudenthal Institute - University of Utrecht, in the Netherlands. In 2014, she joined King's College London, where she researched formative assessment and science education. In 2019, she joined UCL Institute of Education. Her research interests are placed at the intersection of classroom assessment,

assessment literacy, identity, participation, and teacher education. She has published in the areas of formative assessment and teacher education.

ORCID

Catarina F. Correia http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0232-145X

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