



TRANSFORMING THE ASSESSMENT LANDSCAPE: FROM CLOSED TO OPEN PRACTICES

**Despoina Dionysiou,
Theognosia (Sia) Kounatidou,
Nektaria (Nora) Sakkoulaⁱ**
Hellenic Open University,
Greece

Abstract:

Globalization and the unexpected pandemic have highlighted the urgent need for educational transformation towards openness. Embracing openness in education is essential for ensuring equitable access to quality education, as a fundamental human right, especially in challenging circumstances. However, open educational practices are still underutilized in schools, leaving conventional education stagnant and closed. Student assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping school openness. Hence, this paper aims to investigate the impact of open assessment on fostering an open school environment, focused on student improvement rather than mere categorization based on scores. Through a literature review, our research highlights that implementing open forms of assessment can significantly contribute to promoting openness in schools. Open assessment methods help develop essential 21st-century learner skills and instil values such as democracy, human rights, and equity in meaningful ways.

Keywords: openness, conventional assessment, alternative assessment, open assessment

1. Introduction

In recent times, amidst the pandemic and rapid global changes, there has been significant discourse on advancing human rights and democracy, particularly in education. The reconfiguration of traditional education systems to establish an open school based on equity and social justice, alongside the adoption of open learning practices, is crucial for fostering sustainable democratic societies. Nevertheless, schools persist with outdated educational practices that perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and resistance to new initiatives.

Assessment, an integral part of education, is entrenched in these practices, mainly serving to rank students by scores and thereby perpetuate existing inequities (Black &

ⁱ Correspondence: email nora_skl@hotmail.com

William, 2018). Embracing openness can transform traditional assessment from a sterile ranking system into a constructive process that affirms the pedagogical essence of teaching and learning, laying the foundations for an open school.

Thus, this article aims to explore the role of open student assessment in establishing an open school, especially in the context of the (post) pandemic world. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 refers to the transition from conventional to alternative forms of assessment. Section 3 discusses the ways in which distance education has affected assessment practices in conventional education. Section 4 conceptualizes open assessment amid the global pandemic and section 5 discusses key findings and proposes directions for future research.

2. From conventional to alternative assessment forms

The conditions of modern life, exacerbated by the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the urgent need to establish an inclusive school that can cater to all students' needs without limitations, effectively preparing them for the globalized societies of the 21st century. This preparation involves fostering skills such as cooperation, respect, acceptance, autonomy, democracy, and equity. Student assessment can play a crucial role as a supportive tool in this endeavor. However, current summative assessment practices, predominant in education, continue to align with a closed school model. Summative assessment evaluates what students have learned at the conclusion of the learning process by assigning grades, which reinforces its ineffective, teacher-centered nature. Students often view this process as punitive and lacking in creativity (Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011).

In contrast, formative assessment emphasizes the quality and enhancement of the learning process through alternative, authentic activities and continuous feedback, catering to the specific and individual characteristics of students (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011; Black & William, 2018). While formative assessment appears to address the shortcomings of summative assessment and largely meets student needs, it still falls short in certain aspects. Teachers typically maintain control over the assessment process, providing feedback and acting primarily as instructors rather than facilitators, thereby perpetuating a teacher-centered approach (Black & William, 2018).

Therefore, there is a growing necessity to embrace a different educational assessment system that genuinely emphasizes improvement and integrates open practices. This approach would ensure that every student, without exception, has the opportunity to develop their personality and receive tailored guidance in their learning journey based on their unique profile and needs (Black & William, 2018). Open practices in assessment would enhance students' autonomy, engagement, equal participation, and active involvement in learning, qualities that are essential for their adult lives and align with the skills required of 21st-century learners (Ogange, Agak, Okelo, & Kiprotich, 2018).

3. The impact of distance education on the assessment field

Alternative forms of assessment have already appeared in countries such as India, Singapore and the UK, under different names, going one step beyond formative assessment, and with their roots in distance education systems. More specifically, assessment in distance education is formative in its most advanced form and involves the use of technology and student autonomy (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). In this case, the assessment does not focus on the students' immediate response, but on the processing and management of information at a later time (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). Moreover, it is a continuous process - a part of learning rather than solely an assessment of it and is based on the meaningful engagement of the students.

In fact, students know in advance the processes they are to be assessed by and engage in a pedagogical dialogue with both the teacher and the learning material (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). Their assessment is not only about their academic performance, but also about their interactions, collaborations and active participation and, in addition, it is directly linked to real-life challenges. The notable difference, therefore, between assessment in face-to-face education and distance education is that in the latter, the implementation of practices that enhance autonomy and make the students themselves assessors is essential in order to meet the learning objectives that have been set (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013).

The forms of assessment applied in Distance Education have crept into some conventional schools worldwide in the last decade and are adapted with deviations to the respective context of the school environment (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). Well before the pandemic, the Central Board of Secondary Education in India already used the term alternative assessment and recommended that schools adopt practices, such as peer assessment, self-assessment, portfolio building, open-book examinations and flexibility in terms of time and choice of material to be studied by students (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013).

Similarly, in Singapore, which is characterised by its high-quality of examination procedures and a culture of excellence, the Primary Education Commission used the terms holistic assessment and balanced assessment, linking assessment to student improvement, both educationally and in terms of cultivating 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, autonomy and responsibility. According to these versions of assessment, teachers receive information from many aspects of children and gain the ability to build their learning profiles to assess them multifacetedly rather than relying only on their academic performance. Thus, they can progressively monitor students' development, identify gaps and difficulties more easily, and adjust their teaching accordingly.

4. From alternative to open assessment forms

The influence of distance education on conventional education was generalised with the pandemic since the former was made compulsory in order to continue the educational

process. Consequently, teachers and students were forced to adapt to a previously unknown educational environment and to cope - apart from the unprecedented conditions - with the already existing inadequacies of schools. At the same time, the pandemic turned conventionally closed schools towards openness, as - with the mandatory implementation of distance education - they were called upon to respond to the needs of all children in a digital environment, by ensuring their equal participation and access to materials and equipment. Teachers gradually - even unconsciously at first - adopted openness practices, which continue to positively influence face-to-face education in the post-pandemic era.

Of course, in the context of these changes, assessment, as an integral part of the learning process, has not been unaffected. Of course, as the entire school reality was transferred to a digital environment, assessment in its conventional summative form was no longer functional (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). The assessment practices already in place in Distance Education began to influence distance school education during the imposition of quarantine. The compulsory use of technology and the physical distance between teachers and students made it imperative for the latter to become autonomous, since, as far as assessment was concerned, it was no longer a matter of immediate response from students, but of processing information in a second time.

However, even the aforementioned alternative forms of formative assessment utilised in both distance and conventional education are gradually failing to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. The student body, as a whole, is more heterogeneous than ever before in social, economic, cultural and educational terms, it needs direct active engagement with the learning process and claims its leading and central role in it. In essence, it needs and claims openness in all aspects of the school. For these reasons, teachers are called upon to use assessment, not as a method of ranking and separating students according to their abilities, but as a pedagogical tool that allows students to show their progress, improve and receive support at all stages of the learning process (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011; Ogange *et al.*, 2018).

Open assessment, therefore, refers to a form of assessment that confirms the outcomes of the learning process in a collaborative manner, giving teachers the freedom to use tools that are customizable and produce resources suitable for assessment, while students can shape these resources to create their own personalized assessment. Moreover, it is characterized by full transparency, between and towards the students. Students have access to and are fully aware of the criteria and methods by which they are assessed by, the educational material they can use, and the learning objectives set, while at the same time, they have the choice of the place, mode and time at which they will be assessed (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011; Ogange *et al.*, 2018). In this way, learners are given an active role and assessment is transformed from a typical repetitive process into another authentic learning experience.

Moreover, the existence of openness in assessment has the potential to further evolve the existing form of assessment, transforming summative into formative assessment and/or maintaining a balance between the two forms, always aiming to improve the learners (Ogange *et al.*, 2018). It provides continuous constructive support

and feedback, enhances students' learning engagement, autonomy, reflection, motivation and self-confidence (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011; Ogange *et al.*, 2018) and therefore leads to better learning outcomes, improving the overall quality of the learning process (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011).

The techniques used in open assessment are multidimensional, authentic and connected to the real life and needs of all students without exception, in order to express their needs and personalities in ways that are meaningful to them (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011). Typical examples of these techniques are open-book and open-note examinations, projects, simulations of real-life situations, debate-type discussions, presentations, self-assessment and peer-assessment, as well as the creation of digital portfolios and e-journals (Chiappe, Pinto, & Arias, 2016). These practices are sometimes identified with alternative practices used in other forms of assessment, such as formative and holistic. However, the difference between open assessment and other forms is that all choices are left to the students and not to the teacher(s). In other words, students choose - apart from the place and time of the assessment - the educational material in which they will be assessed and how they will do so. Open assessment is one of the foundations of democratic ideas in schools and places students at the core of the learning process, giving them the right to make serious decisions regarding their education and, by extension, their lives.

5. Conclusions

This article aims to explore how open assessment can serve as a tool for transforming and opening up modern schooling. Currently, school education operates within a closed model that lacks flexibility and is heavily teacher-centered. The predominant use of summative assessment, which evaluates students based on specific tests without differentiation, reinforces this closed structure (Gikandi *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, formative assessment aims to adapt to students' needs through alternative practices and focuses on improvement rather than ranking (Black & William, 2018). However, both forms of assessment still place the teacher in a central role, dictating the entire process.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to distance education have prompted a search for alternative assessment methods, leading to an increasing interest in openness. Open assessment places the learner at the forefront of the process. While it shares similarities with formative assessment, a crucial distinction lies in the role of the teacher. In open assessment, teachers act solely as facilitators, while students, who are familiar with the learning objectives, have the autonomy to select the material they study and demonstrate their learning in their preferred manner (Chiappe *et al.*, 2016; Ogange *et al.*, 2018). This approach represents the most democratic form of assessment, promoting students' freedom of expression and responsibility within a supportive educational environment. Moreover, open assessment empowers students to evaluate themselves and their peers, fostering self-improvement and nurturing essential 21st-century skills such as respect, collaboration, adaptability, and autonomy.

Therefore, embracing openness in assessment has the potential to contribute to the establishment of an open school and, potentially, a more open society in the future. Empirical research with similar objectives and the application of open assessment in open and distance educational settings as compared to conventional educational settings could further validate this conclusion.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Despoina Dionysiou has been a teacher of Informatics in Primary and Secondary Education since 2009. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in "Data Communication Systems" from Brunel University in collaboration with the TEI of Athens and the Annual Pedagogical Training Program of ASPAITE. She is a certified adult educator from EOPPEP and holds a Certificate of Knowledge of Braille Reading and Writing System from the Lighthouse for the Blind of Greece. Since 2022 she has been a PhD candidate in Open and Distance Education at the School of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University. She has participated as an adult educator in various programs and is actively involved in educational robotics.

Theognosia (Sia) Kounatidou holds a BA and a Master's Degree in Educational Sciences. She works as a Greek language teacher and she is a PhD Candidate in Open and Distance Education at Hellenic Open University. Her recent research interests and publications concern the evaluation system in open and distance education.

Nektaria (Nora) Sakkoula holds a BA in Philosophy - Pedagogy - Psychology and a BA in English Language and Literature, both from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She also holds a Master's Degree in Special Education from the University of Nicosia, as well as a Master's Degree in Educational Sciences from the Hellenic Open University. She has been working as a Greek and English language teacher, as well as an oral examiner in English language testing institutions. Currently, she is a PhD Candidate in Open and Distance Education at the Hellenic Open University. Her publications are related to Inclusive Education, Intercultural Education and Open and Distance Education.

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