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COMMENTARY



Power, ideology, politics: ‘the elephant in the room’ in the relationship between assessment and learning

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The article by Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck, and Stobart (2017) is, without question, a valuable and necessary contribution to the field. It addresses a significant amount of topics and pending issues around assessment and its main assumptions and concepts. Its attempt at making sense of disparate trends in assessment theory and practice as well as connecting them to the development of learning theories is an ambitious goal and a complex one, especially if a comprehensive narrative is intended. The authors are successful in problematising and raising relevant questions regarding the connection between assessment and learning as well as around central concepts such as construct, unidimensionality, invariance and quantifiability. It is understandable, however, that in this overarching attempt some blind spots remain unaddressed or are given a space that does not do justice to their relevance to the topic under discussion. This commentary is focused on some of these gaps, all of which revolve around the political dimension of assessment and its social function in education and society.

The political face of assessment is mentioned in different sections of the text and, in that sense, one can say it is addressed as an important feature in the discussion. Its presence, nonetheless, is rather scattered in the discussion, which leaves doubts about the extent to which the authors are considering the strength of these forces in the way in which the field has operated historically and continues to operate in the present.

One of the main arguments of the article refers to the need for prioritising the development of meaningful learning goals through assessment over measurement and accountability uses, as the ‘Use of assessment data only as signifiers is detrimental to this agenda’ (p. 340). This is, of course, an important principle that authors in the field of assessment need to continue highlighting in the current scenario. The way in which learning goals are addressed in the text, however, would benefit from further development. Authors such as Michael Apple (1995) have extensively addressed the connection between curriculum and ideology, referring to the way in which the selection of skills and contents considered as valuable learning as well as the way in which knowledge is organised in national programmes responds to specific political and economic interests. Unless one believes in the depoliticised and efficiency-centred view of searching for more effective means of programme delivery and assessment, promoted by authors such as Tyler and the behaviourists (and currently

by neo-liberal policies), one has to agree with Apple (1995) that the way in which pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are organised and enacted in schools' daily experiences reveal the struggle between different views of society and education, in the context of an arena, where power and ideology are produced, reproduced, resisted, reinterpreted and experienced in contradictory ways. In that sense, one would expect a more explicit consideration of this issue when highlighting the need for assessment to be more focused on the development of learning goals. Unaddressed questions emerge in connection to this general use of the term: Whose learning goals and in whose interests? What are the ideological assumptions and socio-political implications of working on the basis of a specific learning theory in connection to assessment? What kinds of learning (and, therefore, what kinds of assessments) are 'worth teaching to' and according to whom?

To better understand the importance of this point and the extent to which it might not be sufficiently addressed in the article, I will now turn to issues around constructs. The authors signal the way in which constructs are driven by what politicians and policy-makers think as relevant (p. 322). Although one can easily agree with this statement, it can also be argued that it relegates political responsibility in connection to assessment to the realm of policy elites, thus, ignoring the responsibility of test developers and assessment researchers in making political decisions when deciding about the underlying theories of an assessment system or interpreting results in connection to those theories. Theory-based development of constructs also involves political positioning. As Messick stated in his 1980 seminal paper (1021–1022):

Constructs are broader conceptual categories than the test behaviors, and they carry with them into the testing arena value connotations stemming from three major sources: First are the evaluative overtones of the construct labels themselves; next are the value connotations of the broader theories or nomological networks in which constructs are embedded; and last are the implications of the still broader ideologies about the nature of humanity, society, and science that color how we proceed.

The third of these sources is probably one of the least addressed in validity theory and practice, perhaps because of its complexity and the difficulties involved in 'Exposing the value assumptions of a construct theory and its more subtle links to ideology' (Messick, 1980, 1022), which Messick himself signalled as 'an awesome challenge' (1022). Its difficulty, however, does not dilute its importance in the development of 'good' assessments. One clarifying example in this respect is the use of the construct *Reading Literacy* in assessment. The emphasis that current assessment regimes put on the development of literacy and numeracy skills is well known. A myriad of instruments focused on these dimensions are currently in place in several countries as well as in different international assessment systems. As the authors of the article state, these are policy-driven (and, therefore, ideological) decisions, connected to what politicians and policy-makers consider as the priorities in learning for the future. A construct like *Reading Literacy*, however, cannot be understood as a straightforward concept or as holding a single meaning. There are, therefore, relevant implications for test development in connection to the theory that is selected to understand this construct.

A very common approach to this construct can be found, for example, in a policy brief around literacy corresponding to the *No Child Left Behind* policy in the US (Kauerz, 2002). In this document, the author develops a research-based concept of reading literacy in the following terms (2002, 3):

Learning to read is an essential foundation for success in our society. Research by the National Research Council clearly shows that the process of learning to read is lengthy and begins early in life. Research further reveals that children who are not proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade have difficulties throughout the course of their schooling, perform poorly in other subjects and are less likely to graduate from high school. In today's fast-paced technological society, higher literacy has become a near imperative and increasingly serious consequences await those children who fall behind.

Kauerz (2002, 3) continues to argue that 'Research has now identified the core, critical skills that young students need to become good readers', namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency and reading comprehension strategies, the latter understood as 'the ability to understand, remember and communicate with others about what has been read' (2002, 3). The ideological underpinnings of this approach to the construct are not difficult to elicit. The first assumption is that the aim of reading is for individuals to successfully integrate to a pre-defined social order, a process that must take place as early as possible in a person's life¹. This success is measured by the individual's performance throughout the years of schooling and by their chance of graduating, as well as by their ability to respond to the requirements of today's society. The 'critical skills' that are then explained constitute a selection among other possible skills, which are left out of the construct. The selected skills involve a rather passive idea of reading, as they are focused on functional decoding and basic comprehension and repetition of the content of a text. All of these ideological features have consequences for an assessment system that attempts to capture this particular underlying theory. The types and scope of questions that are designed, the idea of a single set of skills to which all students have to respond to, the scenarios that can be proposed in the assessment tasks, all will have to move between the boundaries of this particular theory on reading literacy. If one adds to this a high-stakes context, which is the one in which assessment systems were developed around the *No Child Left Behind* policy (Stobart, 2010), as research has repeatedly shown (Baird et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester, 2005; Shepard, 1992), schools are likely to adapt their practices and internal policies to this conception of reading literacy and its corresponding assessments, ruling out other potential approaches, which respond to different views of education and its role in society.

Establishing a contrast with an entirely different theoretical approach to reading literacy might be useful to understand the extent to which construct decisions are inextricably ideological and, therefore, require not only technically sound but also ethically responsible assessment development. The renowned Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, developed extensive work around a different conception of reading literacy, embedded in the ideas of critical pedagogy (Freire & Ramos, 1970; Freire, 1983). His comprehension of the concept of reading literacy:

(...) involved a critical understanding of the act of reading. Reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world. Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (Freire, 1983, 5)

This approach to reading literacy has to be understood in the general context of critical pedagogy, where Freire conceived education as a liberating and transformational political effort, against predominant models of education (Freire & Ramos, 1970). Freire's method for the

development of literacy involves a series of phases in which the context and the problems of the community that the learner inhabits are a fundamental element, as literacy and political awareness are meant to be developed jointly (Ojokheta, 2007). This approach to literacy has not often been the object of national or international large-scale policies but has been influential in many communities around the world, particularly in popular education initiatives in developing countries. It is clearly different from approaches like the one described in connection to the *No Child Left Behind* policy and, therefore, one could legitimately ask how an assessment system that responds to this underlying theory on reading literacy would look like. Would current standardised multiple-choice or criterion-referenced models of assessment be of use in this case? How could a context-sensitive and politically liberating concept of reading literacy be translated into valid assessment procedures? Is it possible to reconcile the homogenising tendency of large-scale and classroom assessments with a transformational and liberating view of the goals of education? Why have these theoretical underpinnings not been considered in the discussion around tests that are, as the authors of the article repeatedly state, ‘worth teaching to?’ These issues are commonly displaced in discussions around constructs, given the operational approach that predominates in test development, which prioritises simplification in order to make constructs more manageable.

These tensions are connected to a broader blind spot in the discussion around assessment and learning in the article. The authors refer to three main strands in the development of learning theory, namely *behaviourist*, *cognitive* and *socio-constructivist* and attempt at tackling the difficult issue of their connections to different approaches to assessment. This is a highly valuable effort and a necessary one in terms of a long-standing gap in the field. These three strands, however, correspond to those that have been predominant in different moments of curriculum policy development and, therefore, are limited to hegemonic views of learning and pedagogy. Other pedagogies and their views of learning remain unrecognised in the discussion. Theories such as paidocentric approaches promoted by the international *New Education Movement* in the 1920s and 1930s (Lawn, 2008), Freire’s critical pedagogy, Roger’s humanistic approach, Radical Pedagogy, Feminist Pedagogy, Estela Quintar’s non-parametric teaching [*Didáctica no parametral*], among others, are ruled out of the assessment and learning landscape in the article’s discussion. These are all approaches that have been advocated for by actors not belonging to policy elites but rather by educators that have historically questioned predominant approaches to teaching and learning and, consequently, to assessment. All of them would involve rethinking the relationship between assessment and learning in connection to aspects such as respect for the natural development of the learner according to her context and interests; consideration of collective or community development; the power differentials generated in traditional pedagogies and assessment systems; the reference against which students’ learning is judged; the actors that participate in decision-making around assessment design; the political and emotional development of students beyond the cognitive realm, just to mention a few.

The restricted boundaries in which the article moves are understandable if one considers the extent to which the development of assessment systems and models has historically been closer to the needs and requirements of policy elite institutions and their social and certification functions. This (unintentional) discursive positioning prevents the authors from recognising another gap in the discussion, related to the role that predominant assessment models, along with their underpinning views of learning, have held in terms of keeping alternative views as marginal discourses. As I have argued elsewhere (Flórez, 2015), high-stakes

assessment regimes have historically been anchored in more memory-based or mechanistic approaches to teaching and learning, which tend to simplify learning and to reduce it to its individual and cognitive dimensions. More innovative repertoires, such as Assessment for Learning (AfL), have to struggle against this long-standing stumbling block, which often leads to its absorption, assimilation or disappearance in practice. In that sense, a third example in the article would have contributed to highlighting these tensions. The use of AfL and international testing regimes as examples is very clarifying of the discussions and classifications that are established throughout the article. They are treated, nonetheless, as two separate cases, and are analysed in terms of their specificity and location in connection to the main concepts under scrutiny. Adding a third example, connected to national high-stakes assessment regimes, would have been useful to elicit the tensions schools experience when trying to enact AfL in practice, as literature around this approach has recognised in connection to external assessment over which teachers have no control (Blackà, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003).

Intertwined with the former points, another gap in the article is the importance that is attributed to the social and certification functions of assessment in terms of the way they have overshadowed learning as the focus of educational experiences. The interaction between what Santos Guerra (2003) understands as the *use value* and the *exchange value* of assessment has had a crucial role in deviating the attention of actors in the education system from learning, displacing it towards what can be obtained through assessment, which could be a potential explanation around why literature on learning and assessment have followed separate paths. This is not to say that the authors do not address this issue. They do so, quoting Foucault's ideas in different parts of the text, but the place they give to the interaction between these functions is not necessarily consistent with its importance. This is reflected by the way in which they interpret Foucault's theory, which seems to be permeated by an understanding of power that is not always coherent with the French philosopher's view. They state, for example, that 'politics does not usually influence psychological constructs so directly' (p. 322) as they do in educational assessment. The distinction between educational and psychological assessment is a contribution of the text and very important points are highlighted in relation to it. In this statement, however, they sideline Foucault's extensive development of ideas around the notion of mental illness, for example, in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965), in which insanity is also addressed as a social construct. This blind spot reveals again how authors seem to be (inadvertently) located in a vertical view of power, characteristic of pre-modern societies if one follows Foucault's ideas (Foucault, 1991), where it is political elites who exert power and make decisions that the population has to accept. In modern capitalist societies, conversely, power is seen as dynamic and as circulating and being enacted in our daily discursive practices and, therefore, evaluative judgements in any field are a means of making subjects visible, knowledgeable and thus, manageable and docile (Foucault, 1978, 1991).

Similarly, in another part of the article the authors state that 'normative theories of learning are not essential to AfL' (p. 335). In previous pages of the article (p. 321) they connect this normative view of learning in educational assessment to Foucault's ideas around normalisation. In this argument around AfL, recent critical analyses of formative and self-regulatory assessment theories from a Foucauldian perspective are elided in the article. Silvia Grinberg (2006), for example, distinguishes in self-assessment regimes the ultimate manifestation of discipline and bio-politics, as the subject moves from the external judgement as a means of

disciplining herself to self-management strategies ‘(...) where the feeling of a watchful eye dissipates in the watching of everyone over each other and, mainly, over herself’. (2006, 81 [Translated by the author]).

This highly valuable piece, therefore, could benefit from a more explicit and overarching view of aspects such as power, ideology and politics in connection to assessment and learning. Thinking of the relationship between assessment, curriculum and learning goals is not only a matter of alignment, as has been discussed by different authors (see for example, Daugherty, Black, Ecclestone, James, & Newton, 2011), but also involves the question around alignment to what kinds of learning and in whose interests. The consequences of choosing a specific learning theory or construct are so important in a high-stakes context that the responsibility for such decisions cannot rely solely in policy elites and be connected only to what these interest groups think is valuable learning for the future society. If one believes with Foucault (1991) in the productive aspect of power it is then responsibility of all the actors involved in an assessment process to design assessments that are focused on learning that is worth teaching to, a decision that is inextricably political and ideological.

Note

1. These learning goals are consistent with those that can be found in documents from International Organisations (IOs) and their testing regimes, such as the quotations from OECD that are found in page 16 in the article, where the functionalisation of learning in terms of adapting to the needs of today’s society is apparent. In that sense, one can agree with authors such as Dale (2000) in distinguishing in these shared goals a *Globally Structured Agenda* to whose expansion IOs contribute to. The connection between these global and local political agendas, characteristic of neo-liberal policies, however, are not sufficiently addressed by the authors when referring to the example of international tests, as they tend to analyse each example in its own terms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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