

Reimagining K-12 School Assessment Measures in the Era of Triple Pandemic through a Logic of Human Empathy and Embodying Assessment

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Abstract

K-12 schools continue to insist on the use of Standardized Assessment Measures (SAMs) as the gold standard method for evaluating learning outcomes. And SAMs obviously lack the capacity to equip the futuristic learners with the necessary skills to thrive during these on-going time-space disruption by COVID, climate change, and social inequities referred here as the triple pandemic. This article troubles K-12 school assessment practices both the formal (i.e., SAMs), and informal (alternative or context-based assessment types). The aim is to raise more awareness on the urgent need to incorporate human empathy and embodiment into both forms of school assessment so as to close up the power-relation gap that makes them incompatible as an integral part of the K-12 school assessment system. More arguably, this is a better way for K-12 schools to adjust to and handle the unprecedented times that according to Cairns (2020), have implications for schoolwide assessment, exam anxiety, the positioning of the teaching profession, and broader equity issues. Human empathy together with assessment embodiment, can ultimately result in the realization of K-12 school's original goal built around equity and efficiency, which obviously, is slowly diminishing.

Keywords: *standardized assessment measures (SAMs); human empathy; embodiment; K-12; alternative assessment*

Introduction

Standardized Assessment Measures (SAMs) are sets of uniform examinations and their corresponding answer keys issued across a population of students (Hutt & Schneider, 2018). Since standardized tests first appeared in 1845, their consequences are well-known and frequently identified in different settings (Reese, 2013). And so, inadequacies in assessment practices are no longer a hidden fact, thanks to the relentless efforts by scholars and researchers around the world particularly in the field of critical theory, disability, and mad studies (e.g., Erevelles, 2016, p. 133; Mahon-Reynolds & Parker, 2017, p. 153).

Traditional school assessment measures continue to rely on SAMs which unfortunately, has become an oppressive tool used by mainstream school system to manipulate and sort students along “hierarchies of (in)competencies” based on their embodied identities (i.e., race, class, gender, and dis/ability). Over reliance on SAMs in determining the academic fate of diverse students is intertwined with schools’ inability to confront the uncertainties of the triple pandemic of COVID-19, climate change and social inequities. Consequently, school’s failure to meet up with its ideal goal(s) built around “equity and efficiency” gets objectified as students’ disability and

incompetence (Skrtic, 1991 p.153), disproportionately impacting students from marginalized homes.

More importantly, K-12 school curricula are now modeled along SAMs contributing to the discourse about SAMs as high-stake testing. This has led many scholars into criticizing K-12 schools as “teaching to the test” (UNESCO Bangkok, 2015; Alan & Artiles, 2016, p. 27). For instance, Cairns (2020) detailed how SAMs as a high-stake test shaped Australian teachers' curricula and indeed, all schools around the world. Little wonder why schools were thrown into a state of global confusion in figuring out the best way(s) to evaluate students. Unfortunately, K-12 schools are yet to wiggle their way out of this problem that has been compounded by the persistent triple pandemic that often intersects to worsen the socio-economic conditions of students, especially those who are already marginalized (Cairns, 2020; Duckworth et al., 2021).

School assessment practices continue to measure only students' cognitive skills mainly through short answers or multiple-choice tests or perhaps, other “purer” measures, such as the time it takes to react to a sequence of flashing lights, what Gardner referred to as “hedgehog orthodoxy”—more “foxlike,” which simply emphasizes the archetypical nature of school assessment practices (Gardner, 1998, p. 19). The major problem with SAMs is that oftentimes, little or no attention is given to students' socio-historical background, especially at the time of assessment design and application despite the growing cultural awareness and constant reforms in K-12 schools. Consequently, SAMs continue to serve as a tool to prevent other vital intelligences and life-adaptive features from flourishing or being adequately harnessed and utilized by teachers and even students.

The main implication of this is that students, especially those from marginalized homes, continue to lose hope in schools as the “great equalizer.” One typical instance is the “educational triage” found in Texas accountability policies that was used to inform school decisions on resource allocation based on student sorting into three different categories: “safe cases,” “suitable for treatment” and “hopeless cases” with the last category at the lowest end of a consideration for school support (Feniger et al., 2016, p. 25). I, therefore, argue here that insofar as K-12 school assessment programs continue to emphasize SAMs as the gold standard objective measure for learning outcomes, the entire academic space will continue to be misconstrued as a place for perpetuating micro/macro injustices, regardless of the numerous reforms and academic support programs that are on-going in these spaces (e.g., Special education and section 504).

In this article, I join other well-meaning individuals to advance the expansion of school assessment practices that are currently in place and functioning. More specifically, my proposition is for K-12 SAMs rather than become abolished, should be combined with alternative methods in a more “humanized” way along the logic of empathy and embodiment which simply means devising ways for school stakeholders, especially the teachers and students, to enter freely and participate authentically in school assessment procedures or spaces. In this way, K-12 schools will be in a much better position to address the constant criticisms leveled against them. One of which is the question about whom school assessments are designed to benefit the most.

This paper begins by first contending that SAMs is a “biopower” of oppression, (i.e., that domain of life over which power has taken control) (Foucault, 1997). Even so, SAMs possess some merits that are often overlooked. For instance, SAMs have been associated with equity and meritocracy, a means of opening education to those who might have been excluded by discriminatory traditions. They also provide a relatively impartial means of assessment by providing student anonymity, which transcends student-teacher relationships, political and family influence, or socio-economic background (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2020).

However, the growing criticism against SAMs is chiefly because of the “gold standard” features it continues to enjoy globally in K-12 schools’ accountability and learning outcome measurement. This makes it appear unquestionable as it persists, thrives, and continues to spread worldwide despite its inadequacies. SAMs are disliked mostly by the students, especially those whom it was designed to benefit the most (i.e., educationally disadvantaged students) (Kohn, 2000; Marcoulides & Heck, 1994). Moreover, SAMs impede the full development and/or the incorporation of more contextually based assessment forms, known as alternative methods, into the general K-12 school assessment system, locally and globally (Bol et al., 2000; Allan & Artiles, 2016).

In the following section, I talked about some existing alternative assessment practices, their unique and common features that distinguish them from SAMs. Also highlighted here are the barriers that hinder the expansion and integration of alternative assessment types into the overall K-12 school assessment system which works to undermine their potential to compete favorably or complement SAMs on equal footing.

I conclude this paper by further advocating for the incorporation of human empathy and embodiment into all forms of K-12 school assessment practices (i.e., SAMs and alternative assessment types), with the notion that through this approach, schools can close the power gap that has long existed between SAMs and alternative forms of school assessments. This is especially important as schools begin to transition into a more transformative teaching pedagogy geared toward securing the futuristic learners that can boldly withstand the triple pandemic of COVID, climate change, and social inequities.

Over Reliance on SAMs and its Potential to become a “Biopower of Oppression”

Since the 1980s, assessment has become an indicator of how well schools are performing relative to each other (Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 33). SAMs, though very vital to school functioning, became problematic when they began to sort for differences amongst students rather than to unite students by helping every one of them succeed academically on equal footing, regardless of their social categories (i.e., class, age, gender, and race).

Historically speaking, SAMs have been known to do more damage than good to students’ academic and emotional development particularly, for students who are at the margins of the society where the idea of full time employment, access to health facilities, good housing system and other basic livelihood appears illusory. The archetypical way of categorizing and labeling students as (in)competent, has led to the unfortunate grouping of schools into “functional” and “non-functional” schools (e.g., ACT and SATs scores).

Functionalism is tangential to educational realities and intensifies/legitimizes the ideologies of rationality, order, and certainty in the field of education by favoring empirical data over theory and assumes that empirical data are objective and self-evident (Skrtic, 1991, pp 152 – 153). For instance, some school administrators have been reported to wrongfully identify and classify low achieving students as handicap to prevent their poor scores from “contaminating” those of high performing students’ so their schools are not labeled as “incompetent” (Blatt, 1979; McGill-Franzen & Allington 1993, p. 427).

This type of exclusionary practice that oftentimes draws strictly from SAMs scores, tends to (re)produce social structures (Cairnes, 2020). It has also been linked elsewhere to “school-to-prison pipeline” (Reynold & Parker, 2016 p. 153), or even “Carceral Logic” (Adams & Erevelles, 2016 p. 150), with the minoritized student population disproportionately impacted in all cases.

Furthermore, Foucault, 1983, argued that the idea of “special” education, one potential long-term side effect of SAMs, was a way to contain 20th century contradictions in public education implying that the original motive for creating Special Education was biased and fraught with socio-political agenda. Perhaps the reason why some authors like Price (2015, p. 66), questioned the very essence of the word “special” in Special Education, noting that it was a way to sort students based on their socio historical background in order to continue to keep them where they “belong.”

Consequently, today’s school reality becomes simply a historical space where individuals with social privileges lack basic self-awareness and empathy. And so, more often than not, the privileged students do not understand the plights of others around them let alone understand the wider world they live in apart from what they are told by their teachers or what they watch and read in books and media.

This condition of learning has been described elsewhere (Boaler & Greeno, 2000) as “didactic” in that students work individually to carry out procedures described by the teacher, with a focus on accuracy and memorization. In such a didactic learning environment, privileged students often take learning activities for granted at the expense of the not-so privileged ones who, are still struggling to fit into a system that continue to “spirit murder” (e.g., Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003) them (un)intentionally through SAMs, defeating the entire purpose of school to transform all students alike. It is simply because of these types of inequities that schools are continually misconstrued as necessary evils by many students, particularly those from marginalized homes. And along this same sensibility, American contemporary school systems have lost all credibility to bring up creative minds who can confidently take over the affairs of the nation and move it beyond its current dilemmas. Sadly too, we see an increasing level of anti-intellectualism flourishing and spreading like wildfire. Little wonder the controversies regarding climate change and mask usage. Apparently, there are still looming anxieties on whether or not to wear a mask and/or take a COVID-19 vaccine even when these measures are proven safe and effective.

Consequences of SAMs as learning outcome gatekeeper

(In)competence is rooted in the logic of segregation and perhaps, the reason why Connor et al. (2016 p. 66), noted that, designating some schools as “special” practically implies a shift from schools’ original ideals. In other words, schools continue to disservice students by taking up a diagnostic function, thereby abandoning its ideal goal of cultivating learners into egalitarian citizens. The consequence of this is a complete distrust in the education system by stakeholders, especially students and the public, gradually crippling the entire school system.

Similarly, sorting, labeling, and pathologizing certain groups of students as “deviants” or “dull” and others as “conforming” or “smart” through SAMs, reifies the binary that in turn, perpetuates supremacist ideology including “whiteness as property” and “right to exclude” as noted in Allan & Artiles (2016, p. 137). One important example that was earlier mentioned was the “education triage” found in Texas accountability policies (Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 25).

K-12 schools (un)intentionally construct embodied differences as gate passes to special education needs (SEN) and remediation even amongst very young children in what was identified as “psycho-pathologization” (i.e., assigning children’s behavioral problems to categories of mental disorders) (Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 7). Psycho-pathologization of behaviors can be traced back to the custodial care era of the 19th century when people with intellectual disabilities were incarcerated or confined in county poor houses. They were then labeled and sorted along hierarchies of

(in)competencies in “custodial homes,” as opposed to the initial goal to cure and/or to rehabilitate inmates (Fergusson, 2014, p. 56).

Pathologizations linger to date as a key cause of the overrepresentation of socio historically marginalized students based on race, class, and dis/ability within special education and alternative schools. Allan & Artiles (2016, p. 7) noted that psycho-pathologization is particularly dangerous within schools because it obscures other interpretations of children and their behavior. It also takes focus away from how to assist a child academically into concentrating on how to manage the child’s behavior.

SAMs have been implicated for causing heightened apprehension amongst educators and researchers, paving the way for fraudulent assessment practices by school administrators and widening educational inequities. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pitted schools and students against each other by promoting unhealthy competition and perpetuating deficit ideologies including the notorious insistence that “everyone do better than everyone else” enshrined in NCLB tenets (McDermott, 1993, p. 271; Allan & Artiles, 2016). The notion of continuous improvement as indicated by improved test scores continues to haunt current school reforms, rendering them ineffective in promoting substantive change.

SAMs Persistence in the Face of Growing Criticism

Critically speaking, the continued elevation of SAMs by K-12 schools as “gold standard” and its persistence despite the controversies surrounding it, could be linked back to the desegregation victory of the 1960 Civil Right Acts that originally began as a push back against racism and the inequities in education and employment spaces (Russell, 2002). School desegregation literally meant “equal education for all” and that in fact, may have distorted the existing school structure of continuing to privilege a selected few at the expense of others.

More arguably, equal opportunity in schools translates into equal opportunity for jobs, and subsequently, into an equal opportunity for individuals to attain agency in the society regardless of their embodied identity (i.e., race, gender, (dis) ability, etc.). Therefore, associating SAMs with “equity and meritocracy” what perhaps, could have led to K-12 schools’ insistence to retain SAMs as “gold standard” assessment practice despite the growing controversies against it, sends out a scary message that K-12 school administrators may be secretly opposed to the optimum actualization of the benefits of desegregation efforts from reaching those to whom it was meant to benefit the most. Along this logic too, SAMs could be considered as a historically powerful gateway to regulate the number of agentic bodies in the society, but in a more subtle and normalized way. Seemingly so, SAMs is unquestionable since it serves different interests and so, can be easily manipulated to provide opportunity for some students to excel, at the same time deny others that same opportunity, especially those individuals who are socio-historically defined as “undesirable” and “incompetent” to the society.

The above analogy ties back to earlier arguments of SAMs potentials to become a biopower of oppression as it continues to (re)produce social categories, “educational debt,” “achievement gap,” school-to-prison pipelines, and even juvenile imprisonment particularly for minoritized student population (e.g., Cairns, 2020; Ladson Billings, 2006; Allan & Artiles, 2016; Connor et al., 2016 pp. 150–153; Annamma 2017, p. 67; Love, 2019, p. 70; Randall et al., 2021; Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 25).

The dialectical subtlety of SAMs is well documented which in part, supports the ongoing calls for a reimagining of SAMs and indeed all other K-12 school assessment methods rather than

their complete abolishment (e.g., Kelly, 2019; Lingard et al., 2016; OECD, 2017; Stobart 2008; Volante, 2017). For instance, Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) acknowledged the advantages and disadvantages of high-stakes examinations such as standardized tests. According to them, such tests help to focus teachers and students on key aspects of the curriculum but due to the artificial conditions and time constraints, they do not actually measure the diverse skills that curricula seek to develop. In the same vein, standardized tests have been reported to possess the power to influence “what we learn and how we learn them” (Klenowski, 2012, p. 178), which arguably, may help students to focus and to develop expertise potentials at an early stage of their career pursuit.

Even so, many continue to call for changes in school assessment practices to restructure American schools (New American Schools, 1994). Unfortunately, the argument for the use of alternative assessments that are known to be more contextually grounded and less discriminatory to students, especially those from marginalized homes, continue to attract little or no attention. However, a few well-meaning teachers, who understand the potential damage SAMs may have on students and schools in general if left unchecked or if completely abolished, have begun to combine both methods in their classroom pedagogies (i.e., alternative assessments with SAMs) (Bol et al., 2000; 2002). However, compatibility issues continue to pose a serious challenge chiefly because K-12 schools persistently rely on SAMs as the “gold standard” for school outcome assessments undermining the good potentials inherent in alternative methods.

Ultimately, K-12 schools’ over reliance on SAMs is evident in their unpreparedness to handle increasing student diversity, especially in these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change. and social inequities. Let me state here that my intention in this paper is not to completely discredit SAMs in favor of alternative assessment methods, rather, to advocate for two things: first, the redirection of the ideals of assessment practices (i.e., SAMs and alternative types), to better address the needs of learners through empathy and embodiment logics. And secondly, for K-12 school stakeholders to see a collective purpose in equalizing the power relation between these two major forms of K-12 school assessments (i.e., SAMs and alternative assessment methods) through genuine empathy and embodiment assessment logic.

Human Empathy and Embodying Assessment is simply a way to subjectify rather than objectify school assessment practices. The process includes triggering awareness of the self-and-others about their roles in ensuring that K-12 school assessments become more inviting and accessible to every school stakeholder including the students. We can start by making the teachers/examiners and their students to become more aware of their role in school assessments by empowering them so that they can willingly and freely recruit their embodied identities into the assessment space to help and/or accommodate others within the shared space. The utmost goal is to humanize assessment spaces and make them accessible to those who should benefit the most from the practice by dismantling the age long power dynamics that exist within it and loosening up students' efforts to get involved, think creatively, and share knowledge authentically rather than didactically.

Therefore, a more sustainable solution to the problem of SAMs is to continue to view the practice as a spectrum of events where its advantages and disadvantages intertwine. The current paper follows the same logic to advocate for a rethinking of SAMs practices and indeed, other alternative assessments, along a framework I called, the Human Empathy and Embodiment Assessment.

Socio-historically, SAMs represent different peoples' interests (Hutt & Schneider 2018 p. 3) which is why it exerts enormous power on local/global school decisions, reforms, and social functioning. For instance, schools without being questioned, are mandated to place entry criteria

for international students seeking admissions into higher education. Through this form of imperialism, countries abroad are coerced into accepting and practicing the logic of numbers enshrined within SAMs, as an objective truth for student outcome evaluation (Hutt & Schneider 2018; Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 33). Thereby, undermining other inherent skills in students like spatial and bodily kinesthetic intelligences (Gardner, 1998, p.20).

One of the constant criticisms against alternative assessment methods however, was that they cannot be quantified and so have no empirical backup (Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 198). Since SAMs rely entirely on short answers or multiple-choice tests, they are easy to score and quantify. However, it promotes rote learning rather than creativity as students, at home and abroad, are taught to memorize texts to pass local and standardized exams that are required for their academic advancements e.g., Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and SAT (Allan & Artiles, 2016, pp. 25–28).

Other vested interests on SAMs include those of the “assessment industries” who have continued to extort innocent students, reproducing the achievement gap that K-12 schools sought to eradicate. Little wonder the outcry for the replacement of “achievement gap” analysis with other, more contextually based frameworks like “educational debts” or “opportunity debts” (e.g., Ladson Billings, 2006). Even with all these concerns, there is still a global reluctance to broaden school assessment practices to that stage whereby alternative assessment methods can compete favorably with SAMs.

The wide spread preference or endorsement of numbers over theory was also noted and explained elsewhere through the “quick language” metaphor (Allan & Artiles, 2016, p. 27). School being an “under-organized system” (i.e., ambiguous settings that are shaped and reshaped by polarized values and beliefs), change can only occur when members of such “under-organized systems” are self-reflective and/or reflexive by considering themselves as part of the bigger problem (Skrtic, 1991, p. 168). Otherwise, members may continue to act on mistaken beliefs which can set in motion a sequence of activities that allow people to construct falsehood as the truth, thus reinforcing assumptions and presuppositions, such as the normalization of schools’ objectifying their failure as students’ disability (Skrtic, 1991, p. 153). For these reasons, I propose a deconstruction of K-12 schools’ assessment process and practice beginning with a reframing of the ways students and their teachers/examiners view, enter, and interact within the assessment shared spaces. I now turn to some existing school alternative assessment methods and how they struggle to thrive on equal footing with SAMs.

An Overview of the Existing Alternative Assessment Measures, their Features and Prospects for the K-12 Schools’ Assessment System

Shepard (2000), in arguing for a new social constructivist paradigm for classroom learning and assessment, contended that classroom assessment should instead be an integral part of ongoing instruction with the goal to develop students’ critical thinking, problem solving, application, and metacognition. Review of the factors that affect teachers’ choice and use of alternative assessment practices have been elaborated in several studies (Mertler, 1998; Suah & Ong, 2012; Shepard, 2000; Wayman, 2005; Fulmer et al., 2015). For illustrative purposes, I will focus on a targeted sample that allows me to highlight alternative assessment measures currently used in classroom practice. These examples further substantiate my argument for the restructuring of SAMs and alternative assessment types through empathy and embodying assessment logics to make school

assessments more humane for teachers and students to thrive rather than remaining as entities that accommodate one another (i.e., survival).

In their detailed study on Malaysian teachers' assessment choices and practices, Suah and Ong (2012) reported some of the factors that determined Malaysian teachers' choice of assessment and practices, including teachers' levels of education (secondary and primary schools), subject areas (language, science, and mathematics), and teacher's experiences. Junior teachers who had less teaching experiences used alternative assessments more frequently than the senior, more experienced ones. Math and science teachers used alternative assessments more than the language teachers who preferred essay type questions to practical works or homework.

The K-12 teachers in their study developed test items that measured more comprehensive knowledge or application of contents (e.g., multiple choice questions) compared to synthesis (e.g. matching questions) (Suah & Ong, 2012). For instance, teachers were more likely to use oral questioning and student observation compared to students' self-ratings and interviews (p. 97). Tests were frequently sourced from textbooks rather than questions developed by colleagues or the school head. In grading and scoring, teachers preferred to give encouraging comments than to consider students' attendance or even to provide descriptive feedback to their K-12 students. In sum, Malaysian school assessments practices continue to reify and perpetuate the ideals of traditional school assessment practices that aligns strictly with SAMs tenets by them focusing on grade determination, student's achievement, and ranking, regardless of the format they took (i.e., either alternative or traditional approaches).

In a different setting, Bol et al. (2002) conducted a study to address some of the limitations they encountered in their initial study (Bol et al., 2000). They designed a mixed method research to determine the extent and nature of changes in classroom assessment practices in relation to school restructuring models for Memphis City Schools in their first or fourth year of a restructuring program during the 1998–1999 academic year. Out of the four alternative types of assessment that they studied, namely portfolios, observations, performance assessments, and student self-assessments, teachers in their advanced restructuring stage (fourth year) reported to have more frequently used portfolios and student self-assessment types compared to those at the first year of their reform.

In addition, fourth-year implementers preferred the alternative approach to the more traditional standardized tests because of the way it was able to properly align classroom instruction, assessment, and student outcomes, as students themselves had higher expectations for their own work (Bol et al., 2002, p. 415). However, the overall result showed no significant difference in the use of the alternatives versus the more traditional standardized test herein known as SAMs, regardless of year of reform (p. 417). The schools used both methods concurrently and all the teachers agreed that the following major hitches needed serious attention to raise the standard of alternative types of assessment to the level of SAMs: More flexible rubric designs; compatibility with state standardized tests, district grading and report cards. Most of them however, acknowledged that the development, administration, and scoring of alternative forms of assessment is an iterative and time-intensive process.

Furthermore, some of these concerns were summarized in a more recent but different study by Fulmer et al., (2015) who analyzed micro, meso, and macro level spaces in school assessment practices. Micro-level spaces included the classroom space, as well as teachers' values, conceptions, and assessment knowledge. Meso-level spaces included the school as a whole, policies and support from school leadership that were external to the classroom but directly impacted classroom assessment practices. Macro-level spaces included educational policies imposed from outside the

school at the national, state and district levels. Accordingly, the factors that influence these teachers' assessment choices and practices overlap and interact in complex ways that are not easily predictable, mostly giving rise to misalignments in what teachers value and do in their classroom assessment practices (p. 6).

Oftentimes, externally imposed factors have pervasive influences on institutions, organizations, and individuals (Hofstede, 2001). It is important to recognize that these multi-level contextual factors are simply about power relations, which ties back to my previous argument about SAMs as a biopower of oppression. From now on, only the factors that were enumerated by Fulmer et al. (2015) that is, the micro and meso levels, will be discussed further just because the actors at these levels of assessment are the closest to the students and so, more accessible to them compared to those at the macro level of assessment. Hopefully, through the transformation of the K-12 schools and their teachers, those at the topmost power level (i.e., macro level), will begin to see the need to effect a statewide policy that will close the gap between SAMs and alternative forms of assessment in K-12 schools.

Securing the Future Learners through an Embodiment Assessment Logic Imbued with Human Empathy

Researchers have found a reciprocal relationship between motivation and achievement, with success positively influencing subsequent motivation, which in turn positively influences later achievement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). For instance, Boaler and Greeno (2000) found that students' interest in pursuing higher-level math courses depended on whether their values and identities aligned with the types of knowledge that were valued in their math class. And so, the intersection between SAMs and "deviance" is only one out of the many assessment test paradoxes that exists in our K-12 schools today. Therefore, ways to reimagine assessments and advocacies committed to equity rather than student oppression becomes pertinent to answering the burning question as to whom school assessments should benefit the most.

Embodying assessment was coined from embodying identity, a concept that grew from Embodied Cognitive Science concept (Koszalinski et al., 2012). Embodying assessment leverages upon the connection between the body, mind, and the figured world of an individual (Carabello, 2009; Koszalinski and Williams, 2012). I use "embodying" in this context to signify a way to consolidate students', teachers', and/or examiners' knowledge in the shared assessment space to achieve either short or long-term assessment outcomes. Empathy, which means to understand another person's feelings, was used in this context to indicate that for school assessment to become humanized, all stakeholders must value and be able to exude empathy from within. Only then can they embody assessments as a humanizing venture, regardless of the type of assessment.

Situating instruction and assessment within the framework of human empathy and embodying assessment will tremendously improve all domains of children's development: cognitive, social, and affective domains. Let me now use Rubrics' design and scoring system as one of the major concerns raised by the New American Schools (NAS) assessment restructuring programs discussed in the previous section to illustrate ways in which human empathy and embodying assessment theory can be incorporated into the K-12 school assessment system. At this junction, it will be more logical to start with some of the assessment structures that are within the power domains of the micro and meso stakeholders (i.e., classroom teachers, students and schools). Rubrics designs and scoring systems can become good entry points for recognizing, recruiting, and attracting

students especially those within the terminal grades (i.e., from grades 6 to 12) to participate and embody the K-12 school assessment shared spaces together alongside the teachers and schools.

For instance, the teachers in the NAS assessment models complained about how to develop scoring rubrics that address the needs of all students alike and at the same time, are mapped onto district-wide standards of learning (Bol et al., 2002, p. 418). These teachers, surprisingly, failed to realize that the development of rubrics is an ongoing process that can give rise to short- and long-term outcomes if properly planned. To begin with the end in mind rather than the means or process may not always yield the desired result in the long run considering that with school assessments, the end users are “subjects” and not “objects” as has been misconstrued for so long with SAMs. Therefore, regardless of the kind of outcome (short-or-long term), rubrics and scoring systems must be imbued with empathy and embodying assessment logics. Developing rubrics is an iterative process and so can be initially daunting but gets better over time.

For short-term outcomes with rubrics, teachers need to understand that the type of assessment does not really matter as long as it reflects classroom instructional realities inclusive of the teacher’s voice (prescriptive), and individual student’s voice (subjective). Nonetheless, the most important thing to note here is that K-12 teachers/examiners need to cede part of the power they possess over their students for being the teacher/examiners through constant self-interrogation to challenge their implicit biases against students’ languages and cultures. They need to understand language from a sociocognitive lens, interrogating personal biases in order to become more prepared to resist the status quo (Randall, 2021, pp. 3–4).

In a shared space like the assessment space, schools in general, should understand that the primary function of language is for communication. And so, must resist the common act of suppressing students’ authentic voices during instructions and assessments. This type of sensibility is what Randall described as “assessment justice” (i.e., understanding and implementing the theory of equity in teaching and assessment with an intention and commitment to make teaching and assessment “be to the greatest benefits of the least advantaged members of the society”) (Randall, 2021, p. 596); Rawls, 2001, pp. 42–43).

Through this framework, teachers, and examiners are made to intentionally commit to integrate knowledge about language development, identity, and linguistic variations in their teaching and assessment routines. Their subjects (i.e., the students), then become more empowered to discover their voices within the teaching and assessment spaces in a more flexible, creative, and friendly manner. In other words, schools begin to resist individual teacher’s creative and cultural inheritance as default in teaching and assessments (e.g., “it’s how I was taught,” “it has always worked that way” etc.) (Chavez, 2021, p. 131).

Rubrics can also be developed for long-term outcomes. The main question to address here is how teachers and schools can use assessment rubrics to support a child down to their community, especially the at-risk group. The idea is for schools to use rubrics scoring as a tool to change individual student’s misconception of school as a necessary evil into visualizing the K-12 school as a great equalizer, as should ordinarily be the case. There is a need to create something that resembles a “strike force” of teacher practitioners with artistic vision on how to form and frame a mind. Keeping in mind that continuous workshops, orientations, and professional developments alone cannot change all teachers’ perspectives alike, particularly, the more experienced ones who have long internalized the status quo mentality and so, are often opposed to reforms.

The K-12 school system needs to first be sanitized at the micro and meso levels if all students are to be empowered alike, and down to their communities. After all, it takes the village to build a child. And to effectively tackle the academic impacts of the current triple pandemic era,

the K-12 school system needs to build futuristic learners through relevant supportive systems, tools and skills (e.g., technology). Power needs to first be redistributed in K-12 schools' instructional and assessment spaces through the proposed "strike force" of young teachers who may be more open to changes compared to the older ones because of their age, enthusiasm, and technology awareness. By doing so, K-12 schools can better inform more robust changes to instructions and assessments with the older and retired teachers reserved for consultancy jobs. These ideas are not exhaustive and indeed, subject to testing for five to ten years down the road to see how they will nurture the type of minds and bodies urgently sought after in K-12 learners.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Today's instructional and assessment world is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, complex, and dynamic; therefore, K-12 schools need to complement one assessment method with a varied approach. All examiners need a solid understanding of multiple assessment methods to facilitate communication, promote collaboration, and to produce superior future learners. Therefore, we must first admit that in this era of uncertainties, the future of K-12 schools assessment practices centers around the integration of more objectively-grounded standardized measures on the one hand, and the more contextually-grounded alternative assessment practices on the other hand (albeit, not in their present state of design and application that tends to constantly discriminate against learners based on their embodied identity (i.e., class, race, gender, and (dis)ability).

By incorporating human empathy and embodiment into instructional and assessment practices, students feel more comfortable to enter freely and participate authentically in these spaces, thus, better equipping them to turn their present conditions into opportunities. Yet, it remains the crucial work of K-12 schools to prove to policy makers that through proper design and application, these two assessment measures—SAMs and alternative methods—can actually complement one another in such a way as to mitigate the common ground lost to the triple pandemic of COVID-19, climate change, and social inequities, that typically threaten(s) the most at-risk students, whether as a single or joint threat.

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