

Synopsis of March 21, 2024 Webinar, “Assessment for Deeper Learning: Rethinking Possibilities and Practice for EL Students”

Panelists: Dr. Eduardo Muñoz-Muñoz, Dr. Sofia Gonzalez-Otero, and Dr. Ma Bernadette Salgarino

Moderators: Dr. Brent Duckor and Dr. Carrie Holmberg

Introduction

As classrooms grow more diverse, the need for equitable, inclusive, and transformative assessment practices for English Learners (ELs) has never been more urgent. A recent webinar hosted by the Center for Innovation in Applied Education Policy explored the possibilities of “Assessment for Deeper Learning” (AfDL) in EL contexts. Featuring insights from education leaders, researchers, and practitioners, the discussion emphasized how reimaged assessment practices can support multilingual learners in achieving academic success, personal growth, and civic readiness.

This article synthesizes key takeaways from the conversation, focusing on strategies for creating equitable assessment systems, challenges of traditional practices, and innovative approaches to supporting EL students.

The Foundation: Assessment for Deeper Learning

AfDL represents a shift away from summative, standardized tests toward formative, classroom-based assessments that prioritize critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration. As Dr. Eduardo Muñoz-Muñoz, a panelist and educator, noted, AfDL aims to optimize students’ “communicative potential” while addressing systemic inequities in how ELs are classified, assessed, and supported.

Traditional assessments often fail to capture the full range of ELs’ skills, leading to missed opportunities for their academic and linguistic development. Dr. Sofia Gonzalez-Otero emphasized the limitations of current systems, pointing out that many assessments are psychometrically misaligned, lack cultural responsiveness, and fail to reflect students’ multilingual abilities. These gaps create barriers to accurate evaluation and meaningful feedback.

The Current Landscape: Challenges in Traditional Practices

One of the central challenges discussed during the webinar was the disconnect between traditional assessment practices and the needs of EL students. Panelists identified several critical issues:

1. **Over-reliance on Summative Assessments:** Standardized tests often dominate EL classification and reclassification decisions, sidelining formative assessments that could provide richer insights into students' progress.
2. **Misalignment Across Assessments:** EL students frequently encounter multiple assessments (e.g., ELPAC, interim assessments, and classroom tests) that measure different skills and use inconsistent metrics. This can lead to confusion for both students and educators.
3. **Cultural and Linguistic Biases:** Assessments often fail to account for students' diverse cultural backgrounds and linguistic repertoires. For example, illustrations and prompts may confuse students from different cultural contexts, as highlighted by Dr. Gonzalez-Otero.
4. **Teacher Isolation and Capacity:** Many teachers lack the time, training, and collaborative opportunities to effectively design and interpret assessments for ELs. Dr. Ma Bernadette Salgarino emphasized that the lack of professional development and system-wide support exacerbates these challenges.

Promising Approaches: Reimagining Assessment for EL Equity

Despite these obstacles, the panel offered a range of innovative practices for improving assessment systems and outcomes for EL students. These include:

1. Formative and Culturally Responsive Assessments

Dr. Salgarino shared her experiences working with the East Side Alliance, a coalition of schools that developed formative assessment practices tailored to multilingual learners. By embedding cultural relevance into assessment tasks and incorporating students' lived experiences, teachers were able to increase engagement and motivation. For instance, mathematical problems were framed using culturally familiar contexts, helping students connect their learning to real-world applications.

Additionally, formative assessments were used to identify not just academic gaps but also students' strengths, fostering a more inclusive and asset-based approach to instruction.

2. Collaborative Teacher Practices

Collaboration emerged as a cornerstone of effective assessment practices. The East Side Alliance implemented professional learning communities where teachers co-designed assessments, analyzed student work, and developed re-engagement lessons. This approach allowed teachers to share strategies, build their capacity to address linguistic diversity, and create assessments that were more aligned with students' needs.

Dr. Muñoz-Muñoz called for systemic support to reduce teacher isolation and ensure collaboration is embedded in school structures. “Teacher collaboration must be prioritized and compensated,” he stated, emphasizing the importance of creating time and space for meaningful professional dialogue.

3. Multilingual and Multimodal Assessments

Assessment systems must reflect the realities of multilingual learners by valuing their entire linguistic repertoire. Dr. Gonzalez-Otero advocated for the development of psychometrically comparable assessments across languages, ensuring that students' abilities in their home language are recognized alongside their progress in English.

Multimodal assessments—incorporating oral, visual, and kinesthetic components—also offer opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding in ways that transcend traditional written formats. Dr. Salgarino noted that mathematical reasoning, for example, can be expressed through drawing, modeling, and collaborative problem-solving.

4. Student Agency in Assessment

Involving students in the assessment process was another key theme. By co-designing learning goals and self-assessment tools, educators can empower EL students to take ownership of their learning. This approach not only builds students' confidence but also fosters metacognitive skills that are essential for lifelong learning.

Dr. Muñoz-Muñoz described this as “nourishing assessment”—an approach that enriches both students and teachers by focusing on growth, dialogue, and mutual understanding.

Looking Ahead: Systemic Change for Equity

Achieving equity in assessment requires more than isolated initiatives; it demands systemic transformation. The panelists outlined several broader changes needed to support EL students:

- **Professional Development:** Educators must be equipped with training in educational linguistics, culturally responsive teaching, and formative assessment design. This should be integrated into both pre-service and in-service teacher preparation programs.
- **Parent and Community Engagement:** Engaging families in conversations about assessment practices can help demystify the process and ensure parents are active partners in their children’s education.
- **Policy Alignment:** State and district policies must align standards, curricula, and assessments to create coherent pathways for ELs. Dr. Gonzalez-Otero stressed the importance of psychometric rigor and cultural sensitivity in assessment design, ensuring that tests accurately measure what students know and can do.
- **Embracing Technology Thoughtfully:** While tools like AI and adaptive testing hold promise, they must be deployed in ways that center equity and inclusivity. For instance, AI-driven assessments could provide instant feedback but should be carefully monitored to avoid perpetuating biases.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

As Dr. Salgarino stated, “We are at a critical juncture.” The urgency of rethinking assessment for ELs cannot be overstated. To truly serve multilingual learners, educators, policymakers, and communities must embrace a vision of assessment that is equitable, inclusive, and grounded in deeper learning principles.

This work is not without its challenges, but it holds immense promise. By prioritizing collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and student agency, we can transform assessment from a gatekeeper of opportunity to a bridge toward success for all learners.
